

Gale Contextual  
Encyclopedia of World  
Literature

# Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature

**VOLUME 3**

K-R



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**Gale Contextual Encyclopedia  
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<i>Eugène Scribe</i>	1389
<i>George Seferis</i>	1393
<i>Jaroslav Seifert</i>	1396
<i>Seneca</i>	1399
<i>Léopold Sédar Senghor</i>	1403
<i>William Shakespeare</i>	1407
<i>George Bernard Shaw</i>	1411
<i>Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley</i>	1415
<i>Percy Bysshe Shelley</i>	1419
<i>Richard Brinsley Sheridan</i>	1423
<i>Mikhail Sholokhov</i>	1426

<i>Zhou Shuren</i>	1430
<i>Nevil Shute</i>	1430
<i>Sir Philip Sidney</i>	1434
<i>Alan Sillitoe</i>	1437
<i>Georges Simenon</i>	1440
<i>Claude Simon</i>	1443
<i>Edith Sitwell</i>	1446
<i>Josef Skvorecky</i>	1449
<i>Christopher Smart</i>	1453
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<i>César Vallejo</i>	1606
<i>Mario Vargas Llosa</i>	1610
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<i>Jules Verne</i>	1620
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# Introduction

## How to Use This Book

The *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature* is a resource for students who seek information beyond the simple biographical details of an author's life or a brief overview of the author's major works. This book is designed to offer a comprehensive view of how an author's work fits within the context of the author's life, historical events, and the literary world. This allows for a greater understanding of both the author's work and the cultural and historical environment in which it was created.

The *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature* is divided into entries, each focused on a particular writer who has made significant contributions to world literature. In some cases, these individuals may be known primarily for contributions outside the realm of literature. Karl Marx and Mohandas Gandhi, for example, are two figures famous for their political activism; in another realm, Jean Cocteau and Pier Paolo Pasolini are two writers better known in modern times for their groundbreaking work in film. However, all of these figures have, aside from their other accomplishments, created significant works of literature that have stood the test of time and affected readers beyond the borders of their own cultures.

This book is best used not just to locate the facts of a writer's life and work, but as a way to understand the social, literary, and historical environment in which the writer lived and created. By understanding the context of the writer's work, you are more likely to recognize key themes and stylistic traits as elements of larger trends in the literary world, as well as understand the impact of historical events from a new and unique perspective.

### Sections Found within Each Entry in This Book

Each entry in this book is divided into three main parts: Works in Biographical and Historical Context; Works in Literary Context; and Works in Critical Context. These sections are discussed below.

In addition, each entry includes: a Key Facts section, containing birth/death date information as well as a list of major works; a Responses to Literature section, containing discussion and writing activities related to the author in question; a Further Reading

section that includes bibliographic citations as well as reputable sources of additional material about the author in the form of books, periodicals, or Web sites; a Literary and Historical Contemporaries sidebar, listing several famous contemporaries of the author; and a Common Human Experience sidebar, offering examples of other literary or artistic works that share themes or techniques with those by the subject of the entry.

**Works in Biographical and Historical Context** In this section, you will find information about how events and concerns in the author's life helped to shape the author's work. For example, Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's experiences in a Soviet labor camp led him to write *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), while his experiences battling cancer inspired his novel *Cancer Ward* (1968). This section also includes information on historical events or trends that had an effect on the author. For example, the scientific and technological advancements of the nineteenth century greatly influenced the subject matter of the works of Jules Verne, which primarily focused on "fanciful" scientific achievements such as a journey to the moon.

**Works in Literary Context** In this section, you will find information about how the author's work fits within the context of the body of literature as a whole. This may include a description of a stylistic trait exhibited in the author's writing; for example, the literary technique known as "stream of consciousness" is a defining characteristic of much of the fiction of Virginia Woolf, and information on the technique—as well as examples of how the author used it—can be found in her entry. This section may also include a discussion of the writer's work as it exists within a specific genre, such as Gothic fiction or Surrealist poetry. Finally, the Works in Literary Context section may contain information of specific themes commonly found in the author's work. The writings of Aimé Césaire, for example, frequently address the theme of race relations in colonial regions.

**Works in Critical Context** In this section, you will find a survey of critical and popular opinion related to the author and the author's most important works. The emphasis is on contemporary opinions, or those formed by readers and critics at the time the author's work was first published. In some cases, critical or popular opinion from the time of publication may not be available; this may be due to the passage of time, as with some ancient Greek and Roman authors, or due to the writer's lack of fame during his or her own lifetime. This section also includes information on how critical or popular opinion on an author has changed over time. Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling, for example, have been taken to task by some modern critics for their depictions of race in their most highly regarded works. Some authors popular during their own time, such as Samuel Richardson, have fallen from favor among modern readers, while others virtually unknown during their lifetimes have become part of the classic literary canon.

### **Other Information Contained in This Book**

In addition to the entries for individual authors, this book also contains a chronology that indicates some major historical events related to the development of world literature. At the end of the book, you will find a glossary of terms—primarily literary and historical in nature—that are used in various entries throughout the book, along with a brief explanation of each term.

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# Chronology

This chronology contains a brief overview of some of the major events in the history of world literature. This includes the development of technologies and tools that advanced the writing and publishing process, as well as some significant historical events that had an impact on the development of literature.

## 2100 BCE–499 CE

c. 2100 BCE

The earliest existing fragments of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, widely recognized as the first epic documented in written form, are recorded on clay tablets by ancient Sumerians.

c. 1600 BCE

The first known example of a literary story documented on papyrus, a durable paper-like material made from the fibrous stem of the papyrus plant, is written by ancient Egyptians.

c. 1050 BCE

The Phoenician alphabet, the first widely used alphabetic writing system in the world, is developed from older scripts that included Egyptian hieroglyphics.

c. 850 BCE

Homer, credited as the author of the first ancient Greek epics in written form, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, is believed to have lived.

472 BCE

Aeschylus's play *The Persians*, the oldest surviving example of an ancient Greek tragedy, was first performed.

425 BCE

*The Acharnians*, a play by Aristophanes and the oldest surviving example of ancient Greek comedy, is first performed.

c. 190 BCE

The production of parchment, a writing surface derived from animal skin, is refined into an easily produced method in the ancient Greek city of Pergamum, effectively ending the dominance of papyrus.

c. 300 CE

Kâlidâsa, Indian playwright and one of the foremost literary figures of the Sanskrit language, is believed to have lived.

397 CE Augustine of Hippo, a North African bishop, begins publication of his *Confessions*, generally regarded as the first autobiography and the first example of confessional literature.

## 500–1499

c. 794 The first paper mill begins operation in Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq. Over the course of several centuries, wood pulp-based paper replaces parchment as the dominant writing surface throughout the world.

868

The *Diamond Sutra* is published in China; printed using woodblock printing methods, this publication is the oldest known printed book in existence.

1021

*The Tale of Genji*, a Japanese work attributed to Murasaki Shikibu, is published. The work becomes a landmark in Japanese literature.

	and is often cited as one of the earliest books to resemble the modern novel.	lished, marking for many the beginning of the Romantic movement in English literature.
1048	Omar Khayyam, a Persian mathematician and poet, is born. His poetic works are later collected—along with some works of suspect attribution—in <i>The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam</i> , a key work of Persian literature.	
c. 1220	Snorri Sturluson creates the first comprehensive written collection of Norse mythology with the completion of the <i>Prose Edda</i> .	
1265	Italian poet Dante Alighieri, creator of the epic known as <i>The Divine Comedy</i> , is born.	
1439	German metalworker Johann Gutenberg creates the first functional printing press, resulting in the ability to mass-produce copies of literature easily and cheaply instead of by hand.	
<b>1500–1799</b>		
1558	Queen Elizabeth I assumes the throne of England, marking the beginning of the Elizabethan Age, a period of forty-five years during which significant advancements in English poetry and drama occurred.	
1564	William Shakespeare, generally acknowledged by modern readers as the greatest dramatist in the history of the English language, is born.	
1605	The first volume of <i>Don Quixote</i> by Miguel de Cervantes is published. Written in Spanish, <i>Don Quixote</i> is widely considered to be the first modern novel.	
1649	The Puritan-led British Commonwealth Parliament, in control after the overthrow of the British monarchy, bans theatrical productions throughout England due to the purported indecency of dramatic works. The ban would last until 1680, and would be followed by an explosion of theatrical development during the period known as the Restoration.	
1719	<i>The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe</i> by Daniel Defoe is published; this book is often regarded as the first true novel of the English language.	
1798	<i>Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems</i> , a poetic collection by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is pub-	
<b>1800–Today</b>		
1856	Gustave Flaubert's novel <i>Madame Bovary</i> is published in serial form, leading to an obscenity trial over its contents. <i>Madame Bovary</i> is considered by many to be the key work that launched the Realism movement in literature.	
1857	Novelist Charles Dickens founds <i>All the Year Round</i> , one of many inexpensive British serial magazines that make literature available to virtually all levels of social class; <i>All the Year Round</i> subsequently features the first publication of the Dickens novels <i>Great Expectations</i> and <i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> . Production begins on the first commercially successful typewriter by E. Remington and Sons, which will allow writers to produce work substantially more quickly and more neatly than writing by hand.	
1873		
1922	James Joyce's novel <i>Ulysses</i> and T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" are both published, defining for many the Modernist literary movement.	
1924	André Breton publishes his <i>Surrealist Manifesto</i> , launching an avant-garde literary and artistic movement characterized by a celebration of the irrational.	
1932	Joseph Stalin, dictatorial leader of the Soviet Union, decrees that socialist realism—an artistic style in which the working class and government leaders are praised—is the only government-approved art style. Writers and artists who create controversial works are censored and placed into labor camps; a secret distribution system known as <i>samizdat</i> is created to preserve and share censored works among dissenting intellectuals.	
1950	Eugène Ionesco's play <i>The Bald Soprano</i> debuts in Paris, launching the theatrical movement known as Theater of the Absurd.	
1992	The World Wide Web, an interlinking structure designed by Sir Tim Berners-Lee for viewing cross-referenced multimedia documents from any location through data transfer, is officially released.	

# K-L

## Franz Kafka

BORN: 1883, Prague, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic)

DIED: 1924, Vienna, Austria

NATIONALITY: Czech

GENRE: Fiction, short story

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Metamorphosis* (1915)

*The Country Doctor: A Collection of Fourteen Short Stories* (1919)

*The Trial* (1925)

*The Castle: A Novel* (1926)

*Amerika* (1927)

### Overview

Czech writer Franz Kafka is one of the founders of modern literature. His most famous works, including “The Metamorphosis,” *The Trial*, and *The Castle* have come to be seen as stories of the struggles of individuals to preserve their dignity and humanity in an increasingly faceless and bureaucratic world. Kafka’s masterful use of the German language and his odd blend of the surreal and the mundane combine to create a unique style of fiction that has proven endlessly fascinating to readers, critics, and other writers for nearly one hundred years.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Kafka was born on July 3, 1883, in Prague, a large provincial capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that was home to many Czechs, some Germans, and a lesser number of German-cultured, German-speaking Jews. His father, Hermann Kafka, of humble rural origin, was a hardworking, hard-driving, successful merchant. His mother tongue was Czech, but he spoke German, correctly seeing the language’s importance in the struggle for social and economic mobility and security. Kafka’s mother,

Julie Lowy Kafka, came from a family with older Prague roots and some degree of wealth. She would ultimately prove unable to defuse the tensions between her brusque, domineering husband and her quiet, very sensitive son.

**The Father-God** Kafka’s father was a powerful, robust, imposing man, successful in his business, who considered his son a weakling unfit for life. Franz’s childhood and youth were overshadowed by constant conflict with his father, whom he respected, even admired, and at the same time feared and subconsciously hated. Kafka later transformed the total lack of communication between them into a recurring relationship in his stories between a God/Father figure and mankind.

Franz Kafka attended only German schools: from 1893 to 1901 the most authoritarian grammar school, the Deutsches Staatsgymnasium in the Old Town Square, and from 1901 to 1906 the Karl Ferdinand University of Prague. In college he initially majored in German literature, but changed in his second semester to the study of law. In June 1906 he graduated with a degree of doctor of jurisprudence.

**Civil Service During World War I** In October 1906 Kafka started to practice law at the criminal court and later at the civil court in Prague, meanwhile gaining practical experience as an intern in the office of an attorney. In early 1908 he joined the staff of the Workmen’s Compensation Division of the Austrian government. Apparently, he did his job admirably well—so well in fact that his supervisors arranged for him to be excused from military service during World War I. Kafka’s generation of young men was decimated by the brutal European war. Between 1914 and 1918, more than one million Austro-Hungarian soldiers were killed, and more than three and a half million were wounded.

**Early Work and Engagement to Felice Bauer** Kafka’s first collection of stories was published in 1913 under the title *Contemplation*. These sketches are



Franz Kafka Kafka, Franz, photograph. AP Images.

polished, light impressions based on observations of life in and around Prague. Preoccupied with problems of reality and appearance, they reveal his objective realism based on urban middle-class life. The book is dedicated to "M. B.," that is, Max Brod, who had been Kafka's closest friend since their first meeting as university students in 1902.

In September 1912 Kafka met a young Jewish girl from Berlin, Felice Bauer, with whom he fell in love—an affair that was to have far-reaching consequences for all his future work. The immediate result was an artistic breakthrough: He composed in a single sitting, on the night of September 22–23, the story "The Sentence" (also translated as "The Verdict"), dedicated to his future fiancée, Felice, and published the following year in Brod's annual, *Arcadia*. The story blends fantasy, realism, speculation, and psychological insight and contains all the elements normally associated with Kafka's disorderly world. In the story, judgment is passed by a bedridden, authoritarian father on his conscientious but guilt-haunted son, who obediently commits suicide.

Kafka's next work, completed in May 1913, was the story "The Stoker," later incorporated in his fragmentary

novel *Amerika* and awarded the Fontane Prize in 1915, his first public recognition.

Early in 1913 Kafka became unofficially engaged to Felice in Berlin, but by the end of the summer he had broken all ties, sending a long letter to her father with the explanation that his daughter could never find happiness in marriage to a man whose sole interest in life was literature. The engagement, nevertheless, was officially announced in June 1914, only to be dissolved six weeks later. The two maintained a relationship for some time thereafter.

**"The Metamorphosis"** The year 1913 saw the publication of Kafka's best-known story, "The Metamorphosis," about a man who is transformed into an insect. Shortly thereafter, Kafka created one of the most frightening stories in the novella *In the Penal Colony*, written in 1914. Though he had escaped the horrors of battle during the World War I years, the privations of life in Prague during the war weakened his health. In 1917, he learned he had tuberculosis; around the same time, he broke off his relationship with Felice. In 1919, he developed a serious case of influenza. Kafka's illnesses did not halt his literary output. The stories Kafka wrote during the war years, were published in 1919 in a collection dedicated to his father and entitled "The Country Doctor." In 1922, he published the story "The Hunger Artist." "The Hunger Artist" became the title story for the last book published during the author's lifetime, a collection of four stories that appeared in 1923.

**Unfinished Novels** Kafka's three great novel fragments, *Amerika*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*, might have been lost to the world had it not been for the dedication of Max Brod, who edited them posthumously, ignoring his friend's request to destroy all of his unpublished manuscripts.

The first of them, begun in 1912 and originally referred to by Kafka as *The Man Who Disappeared*, was published in 1927 under the title *Amerika*. The book, which may be considered a *Bildungsroman*, or novel of education (in the tradition of nineteenth-century German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*), recounts the adventures of Karl Rossmann, who, banished by his father because he was seduced by a servant girl, emigrates to America.

Kafka's next novel fragment, *The Trial*, which was begun in 1914 and published in 1925, finds the hero, Josef K., suddenly arrested and accused of a crime, the nature of which is never explained. The novel is open to multiple interpretations. Critics such as French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre have speculated that the novel was Kafka's rendering of Jewish life in an anti-Semitic world. Indeed, though Kafka would not live to see it, anti-Semitism led to the arrest and murder of millions of Jews under the Nazi regime. All three of Kafka's sisters died in Nazi death camps.

The third and longest of Kafka's novel fragments is *The Castle*, begun in 1918 and published in 1926. The anonymous hero tries in vain to gain access to a castle that somehow symbolizes security and in which a supreme master dwells. Again and again he seeks to settle in the village where the castle is located, but his every attempt to be accepted as a recognized citizen of the community is thwarted.

**Ill Health and a Love Affair** During the years 1920 to 1922, when he was working on *The Castle*, Kafka's health deteriorated and he was forced to take extensive sick leave. After June 1922 there were no more renewals of Kafka's sick leaves from the insurance company where he worked, and in July he retired on a pension. He left Prague to live with his sister Ottla in southern Bohemia for several months and then returned to Prague where he continued work on *The Castle*. In the summer of 1923 he vacationed on the Baltic coast with his sister Elli and her family. There he met Dora Diamant, a young girl of Hasidic roots. Her family background and her competence in Hebrew appealed to Kafka equally with her personal attractiveness. He fell deeply in love with her. She remained with him until the end, and under her influence he finally cut all ties with his family and managed to live with her in Berlin. For the first time he was happy, free at last from his father's influence.

He lived with Dora in Berlin until the spring of 1924, when she accompanied him to Austria. There he entered Kierling sanatorium near Klosterneuburg. In 1923 and 1924, when able, Kafka worked on three stories that were published posthumously: "A Little Woman," "The Burrow," and "Josephine, the Songstress; or, The Mice Nation." He died on June 3, 1924, of tuberculosis of the larynx.

### Works in Literary Context

Even as a youngster, Kafka wanted to write. For his parents' birthdays he would compose little plays, which were performed at home by his three younger sisters, while he himself acted as stage manager. The lonely boy was an avid reader and became deeply influenced by the works of Goethe, Pascal, Flaubert, and Kierkegaard.

**Kafka-esque Qualities** The narrative features that are typical of Kafka are a first-person narrator who serves as a persona of the author, an episodic structure, an ambivalent quester on an ambiguous mission, and pervasive irony. He developed and strengthened these themes largely on his own over the course of his writing career, but they are present almost from his earliest stories. Other interpretations of his works that cast them in larger movements or philosophies are varied and still the subject of much debate.

Kafka's works anticipate the appearance of the literary movement of magical realism during the 1940s and 1950s. Writers in this circle, such as Italo Calvino, Isabel Allende, Günter Grass, and Jorge Luis Borges, attempted

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kafka's famous contemporaries include:

**Theodore Dreiser** (1871–1945): American realist writer of the naturalist school.

**Pablo Picasso** (1881–1973): Influential artist, codeveloper of the movement known as cubism, which helped usher in a new Modernist period in art.

**Federico García Lorca** (1898–1936): Spanish poet and dramatist killed by the Nationalists at the start of the Spanish Civil War.

**Maxim Gorky** (1868–1936): Russian writer and political activist who was one of the creators of the literary school of socialist realism.

**Woodrow Wilson** (1856–1924): President of the United States from 1913 to 1921, chiefly remembered today for his foreign policy following the end of World War I.

**H.P. Lovecraft** (1890–1937): American writer of horror, fantasy, and science fiction tales, he imagined an entire "mythos" filled with uncaring cosmic beings and wholly alien supernatural entities.

**Nikola Tesla** (1856–1943): Serbian physicist, engineer, and inventor who discovered AC (alternating current), invented the radio, and laid the groundwork for radar, robotics, and remote control.

to encompass objective reality as well as psychological processes. The text itself constructs its own reality, to which the reader must adapt or else be left feeling like an outsider.

**Existentialism** Perhaps Kafka's early reading of the philosopher Kierkegaard imbued his stories and his protagonists with ideas that would later be called existentialism, a family of philosophies that interpret human existence in its concreteness and problematic character. An important tenet of existentialism is that the individual is not a detached observer of the world, which is essentially chaotic and indifferent to humans. Humans make themselves what they are by choosing a way of life. Kafka's alienated protagonists often choose to accept the absurdity of their situation, which leads to their demise.

**Influence** Kafka's blend of surreal confusion and dark humor have influenced many artists in the decades following his death. Italian film director Federico Fellini is perhaps the most visibly "Kafka-esque" cinematic storyteller, rivaled only by David Lynch. Among the authors who owe a debt to Kafka's work are Vladimir Nabokov, Gabriel García Márquez, Milan Kundera, Albert Camus, and Salman Rushdie.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many other writers have explored themes of alienation and transformation and their often tragic outcomes, both before and after Kafka.

"The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1886), by Robert Louis Stevenson. In this, one of Stevenson's early stories, a physician uses a potion to change himself into an evil, repulsive man, an intentional transformation with results every bit as dire as those in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis."

*Frankenstein* (1818), by Mary Shelley. A classic novel about a monster who is frustrated in his attempts to connect with human beings. The monster is a rational, thinking creature that finds himself utterly rejected by those around him. His relationship with the scientist who creates him echoes the recurring Father/God theme in Kafka's writing.

"The Fly" (1957), by George Langelaan, is a story that focuses on a scientist who transforms himself into a fly. The story was reprinted in *Wolf's Complete Book of Terror*, edited by Leonard Wolf (Potter, 1979), and was made into movies under the same name in 1958 and 1986.

*The Stranger* (1942), by Albert Camus. Also translated as *The Outsider*, this is a novel concerning an alienated outsider who inexplicably commits a murder.

*Notes from Underground* (1864), by Fyodor Dostoevsky. A novel-length monologue by an alienated antihero who stays indoors and denounces the world outside.

### Works in Critical Context

The body of critical commentary on the works of Franz Kafka is massive enough to have warranted the description "fortress Kafka." Here two of the author's most well-known works will be examined by way of demonstrating the great depth and variety of interpretations that arise from Kafka's works.

***The Trial*** Critics have approached *The Trial* from multiple directions. Some have taken a biographical approach, reading the novel through the lens of Kafka's own diary and seeing his book as a reflection of his anxiety over his engagement to Felice Bauer. In his *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, Jean-Paul Sartre interpreted the novel as Kafka's reaction to being a Jew in an anti-Jewish society. Others have sought literary inspirations for *The Trial*: critic Guillermo Sánchez Trujillo devoted twenty years of his academic career to examining connections between Kafka's book and the works of nineteenth-century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky. No interpretation is considered

definitive, and the novel continues to spark critical interest.

**"The Metamorphosis"** Gabriel García Márquez has said that it was upon reading "The Metamorphosis" that he realized "that it was possible to write in a different way." By 1973, Stanley Corngold was able to publish a collection of essays on "The Metamorphosis" containing summaries of well over a hundred articles, written as early as 1916, when Robert Miller described the story as ingenious but implausible. In subsequent years, commentators have generally taken for granted the quality and importance of the story and have focused on trying to interpret it.

There have been many different and contradictory interpretations. Freudian critics have seen in it a working out of the Oedipal struggle between a father and a son who are rivals for Gregor's mother. Marxist critics have seen the story as depicting the exploitation of the working class. Gregor Samsa has also been seen as a Christ figure who dies so that his family can live.

Critics interested in language and form have seen the story as the working out of a metaphor, an elaboration on the common comparison of a man to an insect. Some critics have emphasized the autobiographical elements in the story, pointing out the similarities between the Samsas' household and the Kafkas' while also noting the similarity of the names "Samsa" and "Kafka," a similarity that Kafka himself was aware of, though he said—in a conversation cited in Nahum Glatzer's edition of his stories—that Samsa was not merely Kafka and nothing else.

### Responses to Literature

1. Father-son relationships play a major role in Kafka's work. The interactions have reminded many of psychologist Sigmund Freud's description of the so-called Oedipus complex. Using your library and the Internet, research the Oedipus complex. Do you think it provides a useful framework for discussing Kafka's work?
2. Whether in literary forms, science fiction, movies, or television shows, Kafka has proved to be a major source of inspiration. Select a work that you feel is Kafka-esque and write an essay in which you defend your choice by comparing it to one of Kafka's stories.
3. What would you do if you awoke one morning to find, like Gregor Samsa, that you had the body of a giant insect? Describe how you would feel, how you think your family and friends would react, and how you might try to adjust to your new form and appearance.
4. Kafka's novel *The Trial* has often been interpreted as a religious commentary. How much do you think such a critique is supported by the text? Pick a religion, such as Calvinism, Catholicism, or Judaism, and discuss the possible textual evidence for its influence.

5. One interpretation of Kafka's story "A Hunger Artist" suggests that this depiction of an artist who creates his work through periods of voluntary starvation is an allegory of the role of the artist in the modern world. Write an essay in which you analyze the story and support this interpretation. Apply the interpretation to writers and artists with whom you are familiar.

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## Yasunari Kawabata

BORN: 1899, Osaka, Japan

DIED: 1972, Zushi, Japan

NATIONALITY: Japanese

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Dancing Girl of Izu* (1926)

*Snow Country* (1947)

*Thousand Cranes* (1952)

*House of the Sleeping Beauties, and Other Stories*  
(1961)

### Overview

Yasunari Kawabata is an internationally acclaimed fiction writer and the first author from Japan to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. His works are noted for their blending of a modern sensibility with an allusive, highly



Yasunari Kawabata *Kawabata, Yasunari, photograph. AP Images.*

nuanced style derived from traditional literature. Kawabata strove, in both his short and long fiction, to create exquisitely detailed images that resonate with meanings that remain unexpressed.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Tragedies** Kawabata was born on June 14, 1899, in Osaka, Japan. He was orphaned at an early age. His father died when he was two, and his mother died the following year. Biographers point out that the young Kawabata suffered several other losses and earned the nickname Master of Funerals for the number of ceremonies he attended in his youth, including those of his grandparents, with whom he lived after his parents died, and that of his only sister.

Kawabata began his literary activities while still in his teens. His earliest known story was "Diary of a Sixteen-Year-Old," written in 1914 and recording his impressions at the time of his grandfather's death. He attended Tokyo Imperial University and obtained a degree in Japanese literature in 1924. As a young man, Kawabata was interested in Western literature and artistic movements. While he had these interests, Japan was being recognized as the third leading naval power in the world, and saw its domestic economy rapidly expanding. Japan was being

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kawabata's famous contemporaries include:

**Erich Fromm** (1900–1980): The German American philosopher, psychologist, and psychoanalyst who was associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. His books include *Escape from Freedom* (1941).

**Roberto Arlt** (1900–1942): An Argentinian author whose novels utilized slang, including copious amounts of vulgarity, which was unusual for Argentinian literature of the time. His novels include *Seven Madmen* (1929).

**Hirohito** (1901–1989): Emperor of Japan during World War II and beyond.

**Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): An American novelist and short-story writer. Like Kawabata, Hemingway sometimes wrote very short stories (often called vignettes), most of them included in his collection *In Our Time* (1925). Hemingway committed suicide in 1961.

**Robert Oppenheimer** (1904–1967): American physicist who directed the U.S. government's Manhattan Project, which was responsible for developing the world's first nuclear weapon.

transformed from an agricultural to an industrial nation, and universal manhood suffrage was enacted in 1925.

**James Joyce and Kawabata's Entrance into the Literary Scene** Proficient in English, Kawabata read James Joyce's *Ulysses* in its original language and was strongly influenced for a time by stream-of-consciousness techniques. Joyce was going through a long struggle to overturn a ban imposed on his novel in a number of countries. The controversy over Joyce's novel is indicative of the times, for the perceived problem with the text is a scene in which Joyce depicts one of his characters masturbating. Kawabata was not alienated by the text and its supposed immoral content. In fact, after reading the text, Kawabata joined a number of other writers to form the literary journal the *Age of Literary Arts*, which favored Shinkankaku-ha (The Neosensualist or New Perceptionist) movement in literature. Although Kawabata's active participation in such movements is generally regarded as exploratory and temporary, he maintained an interest in modern literary currents throughout his life. His only career was as a writer, besides brief teaching stints at American universities in the 1960s.

**Illustrious Career, Tragic Suicide** Best known as a novelist, Kawabata nevertheless wrote short stories throughout his career, and he himself suggested that the essence of his art lay in his short pieces. In English, his short fiction is principally represented by two collec-

tions: *House of the Sleeping Beauties, and Other Stories* (1961) and *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories* (1988).

The former contains, in addition to the title work, "Nemureru Bijo," the stories "One Arm" and "Of Birds and Beasts." The latter features just over half of the estimated 146 very brief pieces that Kawabata called *tanagokoro no shosetsu* ("stories that fit into the palm of the hand"). Sometimes little more than a page in length, these highly condensed, allusive stories range in tone and form from the humorous to the poignant evocation of a single image or mood. His last, "Gleanings from Snow Mountain," written just prior to his death, distills his full-length novel *Snow Country* (1937) into a story of some nine pages. "The Izu Dancer," one of Kawabata's first literary successes, was also published in an English translation in the anthology of Japanese fiction *The Izu Dancer, and Other Stories* (1964).

**Committed Suicide** During his career, Kawabata won a number of Japanese literary awards and honors, as well as the German Goethe Medal (1959), the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (1961), and the Nobel Prize (1968). Kawabata took his own life in 1972; he left no note, and the reasons for his suicide are unknown.

### Works in Literary Context

Kawabata was an avid reader of both English and Japanese literature. As a teenager, he was enamored with the work of James Joyce, and this interest led him into multiple experimentations with form and narrative technique, including the use of stream of consciousness. As Kawabata continued to mature as an author, however, he moved into a less easily labeled form of writing, based in part on the elusiveness of haiku. Finally, Kawabata fully realized his literary style in the creation of what he called "palm-of-the-hand stories," in which small incidents and stories stand for much more than they appear to.

**Experimentation** Kawabata's literary prominence began early when as a student in 1924 he joined with Riichi Yokomitsu and other young writers to found the literary journal the *Age of Literary Arts*, the mouthpiece of the Shinkankaku-ha, or Neosensualist movement. Members of this short-lived but important avant-garde literary movement experimented with cubism (an art style that breaks down the natural forms of subjects into geometric shapes), Dadaism (a style that ridiculed contemporary culture and art forms), futurism (a movement that opposed traditionalism and stressed the ideals and dynamic movements of the machine age), and surrealism (an art and literary style that drew on the subconscious for inspiration and often used fantastic imagery) in an effort to capture the pure feelings and sensations of life. For a time, Kawabata was also influenced by stream-of-consciousness techniques but later returned to a more traditional style that critics have had difficulty categorizing because of its uniqueness.

Kawabata's distinctively Japanese writings are characterized by nostalgia, eroticism, and melancholy. He presents these elements with a poetic style sometimes described as a series of linked haiku, thus making his work "most resistant to translation," noted Ivan Morris. Lance Morrow agreed that Kawabata's "fiction seems to be most valued in Japanese for those qualities that are most difficult to render in translation: precision and delicacy of image, the shimmer of haiku, an allusive sadness and minute sense of the impermanence of things."

**"Palm-of-the-Hand Stories"** Many of Kawabata's short stories are in the form of what he called *tanagokoro no shosetsu* ("palm-of-the-hand stories"), a selection of which has appeared in English under the same title. He said he wrote them in the same way that others wrote poetry. However, the implications of a "palm" story, sometimes only a few paragraphs long, reach beyond the obvious reference to the scale. In Japan, as in the West, there are many people who profess to read fortunes from the pattern of lines on the hand, and with all such magical systems there are elements of synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part) and metaphor—the hand representing the circumstances of the entire body and one small line standing for a whole complex of events.

Many of Kawabata's short short stories work in precisely this way, an apparently casual remark or trivial circumstance alluding to a crucial event in a person's past, or else predicting one in the future. For example, in "The Sparrow's Matchmaking," a man is trying to decide if he wants to marry a woman whose photograph he has been shown, when he suddenly sees the image of a sparrow reflected in the garden pond. Somehow sure that this sparrow will be his wife in the next life, he feels that it will be right to accept the woman in the photograph as his bride in this life. A Christian reference to the sparrow is almost certainly intended, since Kawabata read the Bible carefully and often alluded to it in his stories. In the Bible, Jesus says that since God guides the lives of creatures as insignificant as sparrows, surely he guides and protects humans.

**Influence** Kawabata carved a unique niche in world literature, and while many have praised his writing, none has really been able to follow his lead. American author Steven Millhauser has approximated the suggestiveness of Kawabata's stories, but Millhauser's work belongs to another tradition altogether—surrealism—and is easily yoked to the conventions of that school of writing.

### Works in Critical Context

While recognizing the difficulty of reading Kawabata's works—indeed, they often concede that much of what makes the work worth reading is difficult if not impossible for Western readers to fully grasp—few critics say that the struggle is unwarranted. Critics, in fact, struggle for the words to describe the subjective, intuitive nature

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Kawabata's work has been described as being influenced by poetry. Specifically, his fiction bears the mark of the haiku in its use of allusive, suggestive transitions from one moment to the next. Here are a few more works of art that utilize other art forms to achieve desired effects:

*Crank* (2004), a novel by Ellen Hopkins. This novel about teenage drug addiction is written entirely in poems—poems intended to capture the intense feelings experienced by the addicts themselves.

*Iron and Men* (1915), a play by Paer Lagerkvist. Lagerkvist, when he wrote this play, believed that literature needed a shot in the arm in the form of expressionism and cubism, the ideals of which he attempted to exemplify in the play.

of the writer's work, suggesting that while one often has a powerful experience while reading Kawabata, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the origin and exact nature of this experience, let alone how the text provoked it. It is this elusive nature of Kawabata's work that intrigues critics most and is the subject of much of their appraisal of his work.

**Novels** Western readers often find Kawabata's novels to be troublesome because of the unusual writing style and also because "some of the nuances may well be lost on people who do not know the Japanese scene and do not fully understand the nature of Japanese social and family relationships," observed a *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer. D. J. Enright claimed that even "the most attentive reader, and the most prurient, will be hard put to know what exactly is going on at times" in some of Kawabata's books. Nevertheless, Gwenn R. Boardman promised that a "careful reading of his work offers an aesthetic experience not to be found in the west."

*Snow Country* and *Thousand Cranes* were the first of Kawabata's novels to be translated into English. Although eroticism and cosmopolitan settings made the books accessible to Westerners, they attracted only a small readership. Comparing the two novels, Enright declared that *Snow Country* "is distinctly superior to *Thousand Cranes*." In the latter, Enright explained, "the characters are so faintly drawn as to seem hardly two-dimensional" and the end of the story is so cryptic that the reader is unable to discern "what is being done and who is doing it to whom." Enright praised *Snow Country*, which Kawabata spent over fourteen years perfecting, for its sensitive and adroit portrayal of the relationship of man and nature. Boardman also extolled the book, saying that "Kawabata's characterization is such a subtle web of

allusion and suggestion, that [any] summary cannot do justice to *Snow Country*."

**Short Stories** Although novels make up the largest part of Kawabata's output, critics generally consider the economy and precision of his short fiction more reflective of his artistry. Many have pointed out that Kawabata's longer works are often structured as a series of brief suggestive scenes of the sort that typically constitute his short stories. As Holman observed in his introduction to *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*, the very short story "appears to have been Kawabata's basic unit of composition from which his longer works were built, after the manner of linked-verse poetry, in which discrete verses are joined to form a longer poem." Masao Miyoshi also detected a similarity between Kawabata's method and the writing of poetry when he compared the author's technique in "The Izu Dancer" to that of haiku poems: Kawabata, he noted, "instead of explaining the characters' thoughts and feelings, merely suggests them by mentioning objects which . . . are certain to reverberate with tangible, if not identifiable emotions."

Critics commonly praise the vivid clarity of Kawabata's images and their power to evoke universal human fears of loneliness, loss of love, and death. Yukio Mishima, for example, likened the intensity Kawabata creates in "House of the Sleeping Beauties" to being trapped on an airless submarine. "While in the grip of this story," he stated, "the reader sweats and grows dizzy, and knows with the greatest immediacy the terror of lust urged on by the approach of death." Gwenn Boardman Petersen found sadness and longing recurring concerns for the author, and Arthur G. Kimball judged Kawabata's treatment of such themes the source of the timeless quality of his works.

## Responses to Literature

1. Read *Thousand Cranes*. Enright, the critic, says of this text that when you finish it, you barely understand what happens, who does it, and to whom it is done. Respond to this critic's assessment, citing specific passages from the text. Do you feel satisfied with the way the text ends? Why or why not? Write a paper in which you explain your conclusions.
2. Read Ellen Hopkins's novel *Crank* and Kawabata's *Snow Country*. In the first, Hopkins uses poems to tell a story, while in the second, Kawabata's narrative feels something like the experience of reading a group of haikus. Reflect on the effects obtained in each text by using poetry—either explicitly or implicitly. How do you think the texts would be changed if they followed more traditional standards for novels? Cite specific passages from the text in your written response, but remember that these are your subjective opinions. Explore them freely.

3. Do you believe your ability to understand fully Kawabata's writing is, as one reviewer has suggested, hindered by the fact that you are not immersed in Japanese tradition and culture? Can you pick out a few passages from one of Kawabata's texts that seem especially difficult to understand because you do not know the Japanese traditions and culture as well as Kawabata? Create a presentation in which you outline your findings.
4. Read a few of Kawabata's palm-of-the-hand stories. What makes these stories work? How could you employ the devices Kawabata uses in them in a story of your own? Now, take a short story you've already written or that you enjoy that someone else has written and attempt to rewrite it as a palm-of-the-hand story.

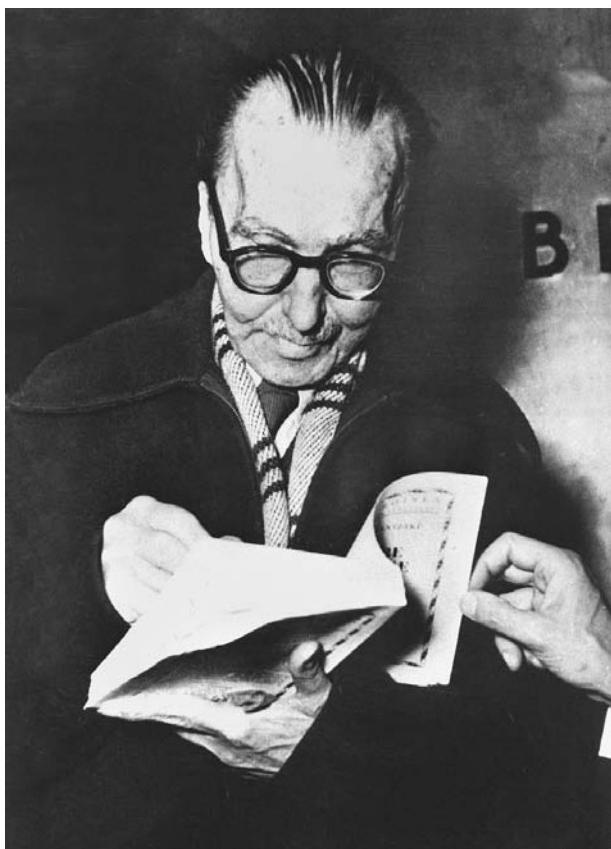
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## Nikos Kazantzakis

BORN: 1883, Heraklion, Crete  
DIED: 1957, Freiburg, West Germany  
NATIONALITY: Greek  
GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry  
MAJOR WORKS:  
*Zorba the Greek* (1946)  
*The Greek Passion* (1948)  
*Captain Michalis* (1950)  
*The Last Temptation of Christ* (1951)



Nikos Kazantzakis © Roger-Viollet / The Image Works

## Overview

Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis is best remembered as the author of *Zorba the Greek* (1946), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1951), and other philosophical novels in which he explored the spiritual and intellectual anguish of modern humanity. Throughout his life, he espoused then rejected many beliefs, and he ultimately developed a personal philosophy that drew heavily on the ideas of philosophers Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche, viewing existence as a constant struggle of opposing forces while affirming the progressive nature of human development. Kazantzakis's philosophy also included elements of Christianity tempered in later years by the skepticism characteristic of modern thought, and his unorthodox treatment of religious subjects and themes has often evoked censure from representatives of established religions.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Turbulent Homeland** Born in Heraklion, a port city on the northern coast of the island of Crete, Kazantzakis grew up during a particularly turbulent period in Cretan history, when nationalist rebels were struggling

to overthrow their Turkish rulers and return the island to Greek control. In 1897, rebel insurrections led to open warfare between Greece and the Ottoman Empire (which included Turkey), forcing the Kazantzakis family to seek refuge on Naxos, a small Greek island that was unaffected by the fighting. Crete became an autonomous state under the auspices of the Ottoman Empire in 1898, and the family returned to Crete in 1899.

After completing his secondary education in Heraklion, Kazantzakis enrolled in the school of law at the University of Athens. He began to write fiction and dramas during this period, and he published his first work, the romantic novella *Serpent and Lily* (1906), shortly after receiving his law degree. The following year, Kazantzakis went to Paris to study law at the Sorbonne and to work on his doctoral thesis, in which he examined the influence of Nietzsche on the philosophy of law. While in Paris, he attended Henri Bergson's lectures at the Collège de France; greatly impressed with the French philosopher's ideas, he thereafter considered himself a disciple of Bergson.

**Fully Launched Literary Career** Returning to Greece in 1909, Kazantzakis began to write verse dramas and to translate works by Bergson, Nietzsche, William James, and Charles Darwin, among others. Three years later, he was appointed to the cabinet of the future King George II of Greece, and he subsequently served the Greek government in a variety of official and semiofficial capacities. However, he spent most of the next three decades traveling in Europe, Asia, and Africa and writing articles about his excursions.

During a 1922 sojourn in Berlin, Kazantzakis became interested in the political philosophy of Karl Marx and participated in leftist discussion groups. (Marx promoted the idea of a social system where everyone would be equal and no one would be poor. Though his views were banned from many countries, Marxism inspired the 1917 Russian Revolution and is the basis of many socialist and communist governments.) Soon afterward, Kazantzakis began promoting Marxism in his travels throughout Europe, chronicling his activities in the autobiographical novel *Toda-Raba* (1934).

**Disillusioned with Marxism** In 1925, Kazantzakis visited the Soviet Union to witness firsthand the benefits of Marxism, and two years later he returned to Moscow to participate in the celebration marking the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. (The October Revolution is another name for part of the greater Russian Revolution, referring to the time in October 1917 when Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik followers wrested control of the nation away from the provisional government of Aleksandr Kerensky.) However, Kazantzakis became disenchanted with Marxism, and in fact with all existing ideological systems, in light of the worsening political and economic situation of Europe in the 1930s. During the 1930s, leaders like Germany's Adolf Hitler came to

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kazantzakis's famous contemporaries include:

**Mohandas Gandhi** (1869–1948): Called “Mahatma,” meaning “great soul,” Gandhi was the central political and spiritual leader of the Indian Independence Movement in the twentieth century. His policies of nonviolent resistance were both effective in his homeland and an inspiration for other movements around the world.

**Douglas MacArthur** (1880–1964): One of the greatest and most controversial generals in American history, MacArthur made a name for himself as an officer in World War I, then became a national hero for his leadership in the Pacific during World War II. In 1951, President Truman removed MacArthur from command of the United Nations forces fighting in Korea after MacArthur publicly criticized Truman’s policies.

**Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973): Chilean poet and Nobel laureate, Neruda was a committed communist and one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century.

**Rachel Carson** (1907–1964): An American marine biologist whose book *Silent Spring* (1962) is credited with sparking the environmentalist movement.

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960): Novelist, poet, and playwright, Albert Camus was a well-known and widely read French existentialist. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1947, and his books include *The Rebel* (1951).

power. The fascist leader of Nazi Germany, Hitler imbued his country with territorial ambitions and greatly expanded its military. Such tensions eventually led to World War II.

As the decade progressed, Kazantzakis began to concentrate his energies on the completion of his most ambitious work, the massive verse epic *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938). Having created the first version of the poem between 1924 and 1927, he completely rewrote it four times in the next eleven years, altering the content to reflect his own disillusionment with political solutions as well as his increasing concern for the spiritual well-being of modern humanity.

**Popular Success** *The Odyssey* drew little attention upon its publication, and it was not until the final decade of his life that Kazantzakis published the novels for which he is remembered today. Already well known as a political activist, cultural ambassador, and translator, Kazantzakis gained popular success as a novelist with the publication of *Zorba the Greek* in 1946. Kazantzakis wrote the auto-biographical work during the early part of the decade as a tribute to his close friend George Zorba, with whom he had undertaken a mining venture in Crete in 1917. The

author, as quoted by George T. Karnezis in the *Carnegie Series in English: A Modern Miscellany*, professed a deep admiration for Zorba, whom he felt “possessed ‘the broadest soul, the soundest body, and the freest cry I have known in my life.’” The novel’s narrator is accepted by critics as Kazantzakis’s self-portrait as an artist and philosopher.

**Religious Themes** The controversy regarding Kazantzakis’s heterodox Christianity began with the publication of his next novel, *The Greek Passion* (1954), in which the modern Christian church is depicted as an ossified institution that has ceased to embody the teachings of Christ. Kazantzakis further developed this theme with *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1955), a psychological study of Jesus. A surrealistic fictional biography of Christ, whom Kazantzakis considered to be the supreme embodiment of man’s battle to overcome his sensual desires in pursuit of a spiritual existence, the novel focuses on what Kazantzakis imagines as the psychological aspects of Jesus’s character and how Christ overcomes his human limitations to unite with God.

Despite harsh criticism of his theological viewpoint, Kazantzakis enjoyed popular and critical acclaim throughout this latter portion of his career, and in 1957, the year of his death from complications of lymphoma, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

### Works in Literary Context

Kazantzakis’s writing is often appraised as a single body that reveals the author’s philosophical and spiritual values. Most critics agree that his writings are at least partially autobiographical. But although Kazantzakis’s works seek to reconcile the dualities of human nature—mind and body, affirmation and despair, even life and death—some critics have suggested that the author’s ultimate concern lies more in striving to overcome inherent human conflicts than in resolving them.

**Nietzsche and Bergson** Critics suggest that philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson strongly influenced Kazantzakis’s thought. The author was especially interested in the concepts Nietzsche outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), wherein Nietzsche postulated that the primary tension in human nature exists between man’s physical drives and his intellectual and spiritual impulses; this idea is central to Kazantzakis’s themes. The author was also profoundly interested in Bergson’s concept of progressive spiritual development as man’s attempt to escape the constraints of his physical and social existence and unite with what Bergson termed the *élan vital*, the universal creative force. Both *Serpent and Lily*, which focused on a young man’s struggle to balance the physical and spiritual elements of his love for a woman, and *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises* (1927), an essay in which the author explains his early philosophical

concerns, display these influences, as do many of Kazantzakis's subsequent works.

**Spiritual Plight of Mankind** Late in his career, Kazantzakis explored the spiritual plight of mankind. This concern is most explicitly manifested in *Zorba the Greek* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In the former, Kazantzakis presented two characters who exemplify the poles of the conflict, Zorba representing a sensual figure, while the man known as "the boss" embodies more high-minded traits. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the conflict is portrayed as the essential dilemma of Christ, who is torn between his wish to serve God and his physical appetites. Characteristically, Kazantzakis does not attempt to present a resolution to the sensual-spiritual conflict in these novels. Zorba and his boss learn from their exchange of ideas but part essentially unchanged, while Christ, even as he is sacrificing himself on the cross, dreams of leading the sensually satisfying life of an ordinary man.

### Works in Critical Context

While Kazantzakis's stature as a unique voice in modern literature is uncontested, critical opinion about the literary quality of his individual works is frequently divided. Many hold the view that Kazantzakis subordinated his artistic concerns to the philosophical ideas he wanted to express. While some critics admire what they consider the passionate poetic voice with which the author communicates with his readers, others appreciate the realistic descriptions, metaphors, and profuse imagery that comprise Kazantzakis's writing style.

**Importance of Later Novels** Although Kazantzakis regarded *The Odyssey* as his masterpiece, critics generally consider Kazantzakis's later novels more significant as illustrations of both his literary aims and his philosophy, praising the profound understanding of the human condition displayed in these works and commending Kazantzakis's affirmations of the value of human existence. In addition, many suggest that Kazantzakis's use of modern demotic Greek, rather than the accepted literary language, represents a significant advancement in the development of Greek literature. Long popular in his native country, his novels have been widely translated, and three of them—*Zorba the Greek*, *The Greek Passion*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*—have served as the basis for films. As a result, Kazantzakis remains an important and much-discussed figure in world literature, reflecting the traditional culture of his native Crete while exemplifying the philosophical concerns of the modern European intellectual community.

**The Odyssey** Critics assert that *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* functions at an allegorical as well as autobiographical level. As explained by John Ciardi in the *Saturday Review*, each episode in the poem is "an allegory of a stage of the soul, and all are threaded together on a series of mythic

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Other works that attempt to address the dualities of life, as Kazantzakis's so often did, include:

*Full Metal Jacket* (1987), a film directed by Stanley Kubrick. Ostensibly about the Vietnam War, *Full Metal Jacket* focuses on the polar extremes of human existence: the warmth of humanity and the cold brutality of war.

*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), a novella by Robert Louis Stevenson. One of Stevenson's best-known works, this novella examines how one man can encompass both good and evil within the same personality.

*Crime and Punishment* (1866), a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. One of the central themes of Dostoyevsky's masterpiece is that humans possess a duality that manifests as both external and internal conflicts. The inner conflict between the two sides of central character Raskolnikov's dual nature drives most of the novel.

themes." Odysseus progresses, according to the reviewer, through seven stages of "Bestiality, Battle-Hunger, Lust, Pure Intellect, Despair, Detachment, and, finally, Pure Soul." Critics disagree, however, in their interpretations of the poem's ending. Some regard Odysseus's solitary death as Kazantzakis's comment on life's ultimate meaninglessness, while others construe Odysseus's withdrawal as the triumph of man's soul over both his physical existence and the random disasters that endanger it.

Although critics in Greece reportedly reacted negatively to Kazantzakis's use of demotic language, reception of the work in English translation was generally favorable, with some reviewers admiring the quality of the poetry itself. "The literary achievement of Kazantzakis's *Odyssey* lies in his rich and sonorous language and vivid and original imagery," asserted C. A. Trypanis, for example, in the *Manchester Guardian*. But some critics found the poem outdated and unoriginal. "There is something oddly old-fashioned about this poem.... Not a new departure nor a daring experiment, but simply a kind of nostalgia for the days of the grand style and the picaresque epic," noted *Poetry* contributor L. O. Coxe. Still other reviewers were highly enthusiastic in their praise, hailing the epic as a masterpiece. Adonis Decavallies, for instance, in another *Poetry* review, lauded *The Odyssey* as "undoubtedly the greatest long poem of our time, a colossal achievement in art and substance. It is the mature product of Kazantzakis's deep familiarity with the best in world literature and thought, of intense living, traveling, and thinking."

**The Last Temptation of Christ** Angered by *The Last Temptation of Christ's* presentation of Christ's humanity, the Greek Orthodox Church branded Kazantzakis a heretic and threatened to excommunicate him. The book was also placed on the Roman Catholic Index of Forbidden Books, most probably because of its depiction of Jesus's desire to marry and beget children. Criticism of the English translation ranged from the disapproving to the highly laudatory. The *Christian Century*'s Kyle Haselden expressed disappointment with Christ's characterization, maintaining that Kazantzakis "writes divinely of that which is human.... But in depicting that which is divine the novelist is reduced to the human touch."

**Atlantic** contributor Phoebe Adams assessed *The Last Temptation's* Jesus as a literary figure, noting that "this Jesus is not the assured son of God following a preaccepted path, but a man who, in God's service,... assumes something of the character of those epic heroes who choose their deaths—Achilles sailing for Troy under the shadow of the prophecy, or Cuchulainn riding on to battle when he knows his magical luck has left him." More impressed was Nancie Matthews in the *New York Times Book Review*, who described *The Last Temptation of Christ* as a "mosaic of all the highlights of the Gospel story, vividly colored by... extravagant imagery, which is always richly overflowing but at times is distasteful, too." She concluded, "If the book can be read without prejudice, this will be found a powerfully moving story of a great spiritual victory."

## Responses to Literature

1. The theme of the struggle between spirit and flesh predominates in Kazantzakis's writings. Read at least one work by the author and write a paper in which you explain how this theme affects the work you have chosen.
2. There is a marked contrast between Zorba and the narrator in *Zorba the Greek*. Create a presentation in which you display these differences for the class.
3. How does Kazantzakis portray Jesus Christ's psychological struggles in *The Last Temptation of Christ*? What are some of the criticisms that have been leveled against this portrayal? Write a paper in which you outline your opinions on the matter.
4. How does Kazantzakis relate New Testament events to the modern political conflict between Greece and Turkey in *The Greek Passion*? With a partner, create a visual presentation of your findings.
5. Critics have claimed that Odysseus in Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* is an autobiographical figure. Why did Kazantzakis cast himself as a wanderer? Discuss the significance of travel in Kazantzakis's life in a paper.

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## John Keats

BORN: 1795, London

DIED: 1821, Rome

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry, letters, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Poems* (1817)

*Endymion* (1818)

*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820)

*The Letters of John Keats* (1958)

## Overview

John Keats is recognized as a key figure in the English Romantic movement, a period in which writers placed the individual at the core of all experience, valued imagination and beauty, and looked to nature for revelation of truth. Although his literary career spanned only four years and consisted of a mere fifty-four poems, Keats demonstrated remarkable intellectual and artistic development.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood and Family Tragedies** Scholars often note that Keats's childhood provides no hint of the genius to emerge. Born October 31, 1795, the oldest of four children of a stable-keeper, Keats was raised in Moorfields, London. His father died from injuries sustained in a fall from a horse when Keats was seven. This accident



John Keats Keats, John, photograph. The Library of Congress.

proved to be the first in a series of losses and dislocations that would pursue Keats throughout his brief life and convince him of art's power to bring solace and meaning to human suffering. In 1803, Keats enrolled at the Clarke School in nearby Enfield, where he was distinguished only by his small stature (he was barely over five feet tall as an adult) and somewhat confrontational disposition. At the Clarke school, Keats first encountered the works that influenced his early poetry, including Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and John Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary*, on which he based his knowledge of Greek mythology.

Keats's mother died of tuberculosis in 1810, and the Keats children were placed in the care of a guardian, Richard Abbey. At the time, tuberculosis was a pandemic in Europe. About 25 percent of all deaths in the early nineteenth century in Europe were attributable to tuberculosis. Doctors did not yet understand how the disease was spread, and accepted treatment for the disease often made the condition worse.

**Writing in Secret While Pursuing a Medical Career** At fifteen, Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary. Four years later, he entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, where he completed medical courses and in 1816 passed the examinations to become an apothecary. Keats had begun to compose poetry as early as 1812, however, and secretly decided to support himself on his small inheritance after graduation and

devote himself to writing. To avoid a confrontation with his guardian, Keats continued his studies to become a surgeon, carefully concealing his decision from Abbey until he had reached the age of majority and was free of his guardian's jurisdiction.

**An Influential Circle of Friends** Keats's meeting in 1816 with Leigh Hunt influenced his decision to pursue a career as a poet, and Hunt published Keats's early poems in his liberal journal, the *Examiner*. Keats was drawn readily into Hunt's circle, which included the poet John Hamilton Reynolds, the critic William Hazlitt, and the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon. *Poems*, an early collection, was published in 1817 but received little attention. His next work, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, a full-length allegory based on Greek mythology, was published the following year to mixed reviews. Soon after the appearance of *Endymion*, Keats began to experience the first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and in 1818 his brother, Tom. Following Tom's death, Keats lived with his close friend Charles Armitage Brown in Hampstead.

**"Half in love with easeful Death..."** It was around this time that he composed his famous "Ode to a Nightingale," a moody, sumptuous poem in which the speaker lauds the beautiful sound of the nightingale and fantasizes about dying—"to cease upon the midnight with no pain"—and forgetting all "the weariness, the fever, and the fret." The poem seems to be a clear reaction to Tom's death and his own infirmity, as Keats laments that he lives in a world where "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." At the same time, the poem calls the bird "immortal" and timeless. The bird represents Keats the poet, capable of producing a beautiful "song" that will live after he is gone.

Keats continued writing and spent a considerable amount of time reading the works of William Wordsworth, John Milton, and Shakespeare. Here Keats also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter. The rigors of work, poor health, and constant financial difficulties prevented the two from fulfilling their desire to be married.

In a final effort to regain his health, Keats sailed to Italy in September 1820; he died in Rome in February of the following year. He is buried there beneath a gravestone that bears an epitaph he himself composed: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water."

### Works in Literary Context

Keats's poems, especially the later works published in *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), are praised not only for their sensuous imagery and passionate tone but also for the insight they provide into aesthetic and human concerns, particularly the transience of beauty and happiness. The artistic philosophy described in the famous quote from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"—"beauty is truth, truth beauty"—is clarified in his correspondence with his family and friends. In

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Keat's famous contemporaries include:

**Napoléon Bonaparte** (1769–1821): General of the French Revolution and, later, emperor of France.

**William Wordsworth** (1770–1850): Wordsworth was the most influential of the Romantic poets and the one who most emphasized the importance of nature.

**Simón Bolívar** (1783–1830): This South American liberator eventually died of tuberculosis.

**George Gordon, Lord Byron** (1788–1824): This notorious and melancholy Romantic poet was known for his dark moods and stormy lines.

**Walt Whitman** (1819–1892): Although American, Whitman wrote poems on some of the same themes as his fellow Romantics across the ocean; namely, a celebration of nature and an appreciation of artistic passion.

**Matthew Arnold** (1822–1888): A great poet of the late Victorian era, Arnold cited Keats as a major influence.

these letters, which some readers value as much as his poems, it is possible to trace the evolution of Keats's poetic thought and technique as he matured.

**Romantic Movement** Keats was a quintessential Romantic poet. The Romantic Movement in literature, which began in the late eighteenth century, was a reaction against what was seen as the cold rationality of the Enlightenment period. During the Enlightenment, developments in science and technology ushered in the massive social changes in western society. The Industrial Revolution brought about population explosions in European cities while the works of political scientists and philosophers laid the groundwork for the American and French Revolutions. The Romantics viewed science and technology skeptically, and stressed the beauty of nature and individual emotion in their work.

**Transience of Life** Perhaps because of the widespread presence of tuberculosis among those he loved and in Europe in general, Keats seemed to recognize that time moved swiftly and that life was fleeting. "I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered," Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne in February 1820, just after he became ill. In Keats's work, the struggle with aesthetic form becomes an image of a struggle for meaning against the limits of experience. The very form of his art seems to embody and interpret the conflicts of mortality and desire. The urgency of this poetry has always appeared greater to his readers for his intense love of beauty and his tragically short life. Keats approached the relations among

experience, imagination, art, and illusion with penetrating thoughtfulness, with neither sentimentality nor cynicism but with a delight in the ways in which beauty, in its own subtle and often surprising ways, reveals the truth.

**Negative Capability** Two prevalent themes in Keats's poetry are the power of imaginative perception and the capacity of a truly creative nature to go beyond the self. In a letter written to his brothers, Keats mentions having seen a painting by Benjamin West and finding it lacking: "It is a wonderful picture . . . ; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss. . . . the excellence of every Art is its intensity." Keats then coined a term that is one of his most distinctive contributions to aesthetic discourse: *negative capability*, which is present, Keats explains, "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Perhaps Keats himself provided the best gloss on this term when he wrote, in a marginal jotting on a passage in John Milton's masterwork *Paradise Lost*, of "the intense pleasure of not knowing[,] a sense of independence, of power, from the fancy's creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities."

### Works in Critical Context

The history of Keats's early reputation is dominated by two hostile, unsigned reviews of *Endymion*, one credited to John Gibson Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the other to John Wilson Croker in the *Quarterly Review*. Lockhart, a vociferous critic of what he termed "The Cockney School," named for its members' ties to London and their alleged lack of refinement, attacked not only Keats's poem, which he denigrated on artistic and moral grounds, but on what he perceived as the poet's lack of taste, education, and upbringing. While Croker was neither so vitriolic nor personally degrading as Lockhart—critics acknowledge, in fact, the legitimacy of several of his complaints—his essay was singled out as damaging and unjust by Keats's supporters, who rushed to the poet's defense. While Keats was apparently disturbed only temporarily by these attacks, they gave rise to the legend that his death had been caused, or at least hastened, by these two reviews. A chief perpetrator of this notion was Percy Bysshe Shelley, who composed and published his famous *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of the Poet John Keats* shortly after Keats's death. The preface to this work implicated Croker as Keats's murderer. In conjunction with the writings of Keats's well-meaning friends, Shelley's work effectively created an image of Keats as a sickly and unnaturally delicate man, so fragile that a magazine article was capable of killing him. Lord Byron commented wryly on this idea in a famous couplet in his poem *Don Juan*: "'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle / Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."

**Legacy** Keats's dying fears of eternal obscurity were proved wrong in the generations after his death. Even as early as 1820, people were beginning to write of Keats's

legacy. The influential Francis Jeffrey wrote an approving, if belated, essay in *The Edinburgh Review*, and the obituary in *The London Magazine* (April 1921), noted, "There is but a small portion of the public acquainted with the writings of this young man, yet they were full of high imagination and delicate fancy." By 1853 Matthew Arnold could speak of Keats as "in the school of Shakespeare," and, despite his weak sense of dramatic action and his overly lush imagery was "one whose exquisite genius and pathetic death render him forever interesting." Yet it was just this quality of lush, "pictorial" imagery that Victorians admired in Keats, as reflected in popular paintings related to his works by Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and poets such as Alfred Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne, who wrote of "mastery of visual detail, his instinct for the absolute expression of absolute natural beauty." In 1857, Alexander Smith, in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (eighth edition) entry on Keats, could proclaim, with some exaggeration, that "With but one or two exceptions, no poet of the last generation stands at this moment higher in the popular estimation, and certainly no one has in a greater degree influenced the poetic development of the last thirty years."

## Responses to Literature

1. If you are interested in the impact of tuberculosis on nineteenth-century European culture, *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man, and Society* (1952), by René DuBos, provides an excellent introduction. In this landmark study of the social meaning of tuberculosis, DuBos prominently features Keats and the myths surrounding his illness.
2. Research the myth of *Endymion*, and then read Keats's poem. What do you think attracted Keats to the myth? What changes did he make to it?
3. Do you also see Keats as a tragic and sympathetic personality? What advice would you give him if you could?
4. Keats and many other Romantics were preoccupied with perception and how an individual's view of the world alters what is seen and experienced. Look up the definition of *solipsism* and argue whether Keats is a solipsist at heart.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Issues of immortality and human transience have preoccupied thinkers for millennia. Rulers, philosophers, and poets have pondered whether human accomplishments will be remembered or make a lasting impact. Keats was extremely interested in his own literary legacy. Here are some other works that examine the idea of the transience or permanence of man's efforts:

*The Iliad* (7th–8th century B.C.E.), by Homer. The famous hero of this epic, Achilles, chooses death in battle over a long, peaceful life because attaining glory in battle means his name will be immortalized.

*The Stranger* (1942), by Albert Camus. This novel's protagonist is convinced that the universe is indifferent to the desires and actions of humans.

"Annabel Lee" (1849), by Edgar Allan Poe. This long poem commemorates, rather morbidly, the death of a young girl and her influence on the speaker.

*The Diary of a Young Girl* (1942), by Anne Frank. Written while hiding from the Nazis in Amsterdam, this diary details the trials Frank's family went through before they were sent to a concentration camp.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1982), by Milan Kundera. Set in springtime in a politically unbalanced Prague, the characters, most of them artists, feel that their lives are fleeting; thus, although they create with purpose, they also hesitate and often choose badly when it comes to their personal lives.

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## Thomas Keneally

BORN: 1935, Sydney, Australia

NATIONALITY: Australian

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Place at Whitton* (1964)

*Blood Red, Sister Rose* (1974)

*Schindler's List* (1982)

*A River Town* (1995)



Thomas Keneally Keneally, Thomas, photograph. AP Images.

## Overview

Thomas Keneally (also known as William Coyle and Thomas Michael Keneally) has evolved from one of Australia's best-known and most prolific writers to a novelist with a worldwide following. Even before *The Great Shame*, his recent historical work, Keneally had worked extensively with material from Australia's past. But, his body of work is noteworthy for its range of material. He has written on subjects as varied as Joan of Arc, the American Civil War, the Holocaust, and contemporary Africa. However diverse the material, Keneally brings to it a consistently humanistic point of view, an eye for accuracy, and a knack for engaging storytelling, all of which account both for his wide readership and critical acclaim.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Preparing for Priesthood** Keneally was born on October 7, 1935, in Sydney, Australia, to Edmund Thomas and Elsie Coyle Keneally. The son of Roman Catholic parents of Irish descent, he was educated at St. Patrick's College in Strathfield, New South Wales, and later studied for the priesthood from 1953 to 1960. Although Keneally left the seminary before being ordained, he later drew on his experiences as a seminarian in his early novels *The Place at Whitton* (1964) and *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968). He taught high school in Sydney during the early 1960s, and from 1968 to 1970 he served as a lecturer in drama at the University of New England in New South Wales. During this time, Keneally gained recognition as a historical novelist with the publication of *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967), a consideration of Australia's early history as an English penal colony.

**Early Career** While he began to write, Keneally supported himself in various jobs as a builder's laborer, clerk, and schoolteacher. Keneally's first published work, the story "The Sky Burning Up Above the Man," appeared pseudonymously in the *Bulletin* magazine on June 23, 1962 under the name "Bernard Coyle" (the surname was his mother's maiden name). Two years later, his first novel, *The Place at Whitton* (1964), was published.

In 1966 Keneally was awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund grant of four thousand dollars that freed him temporarily to write full-time. On November 15 of that year, his first play, *Halloran's Little Boat*, was performed (published in 1968). Commissioned by the National Institute of Dramatic Art, the play was an initial working of the material given fuller and richer shape in Keneally's third novel, *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967). Set in a penal colony at the "world's worse end" at the close of the eighteenth century, the book was Keneally's first popular and critical success, not least in securing the first of successive Miles Franklin Awards for the best Australian novel of the year. He crafted a complex tale of the origins of his country, one that involved the British or Irish ancestry of the characters, the transplanting of their traditional antagonisms, religions, class divisions, and tribal memories. Now, for the first time in the southern continent, voice was given to ancestral European oaths, creeds, and betrayals.

Keneally's next novel, *Three Cheers for the Paraclete* (1968), also won the Miles Franklin Award. This work, his second fictional account of Catholic religious life in Australia, tells of a priest—Father Maitland—who has pseudonymously written a revisionist view of the historical and political appropriations of God that his church has countenanced. When discovered, his punishment is to be placed by his bishop under an interdiction to publish no more. The terror of such a sentence for the fertile Keneally can readily be imagined.

Between 1968 and 1970, Keneally lectured in drama at the University of New England. He also continued to write plays—*Childermas* (1968), *An Awful Rose* (1972), *Bullie's House* (1980, published the following year)—in addition to writing a section of the motion picture *Libido* (1973). His time at the university furnished the "campus novel" parts of his next book, *The Survivor*, which has for its other main setting Antarctica, which Keneally had visited as a guest of the U.S. Navy in 1968. This novel won the Captain Cook Bicentenary Award in 1970 and was made into a television movie the following year. Keneally found the frozen continent so congenial to his imagination that he used the setting for another novel, *A Victim of the Aurora*. While the latter is historical fiction, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, each interrogates the heroic elements of classic Antarctic narratives of exploration and survival; each transposes the search for the nature and identity of Australians from their country to Antarctica; and each is a deft and satisfying murder

mystery, which reflects Keneally's extension of talents into yet another genre.

After a time living in London in the early 1970s, Keneally returned to Australia. In 1972, one of his most popular and best-selling novels was published. Based on the true story of killings committed by the part-Aboriginal Governor brothers in New South Wales at the end of the nineteenth century, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is the novel in which Keneally deals most angrily with the white settlers' treatment of the Australian Aborigines. He has argued that "the snake in the garden is that we have not recognised the prior sovereignty of the Aborigines." Keneally has been neither blundering, sentimental, nor too credulous in his engagement with relations between black and white Australians. Nevertheless, he became the subject of virulent, often self-interested criticism from experts in fields other than literature. For Keneally, however, the story allowed another unfettered review of matters of conscience in an Australian historical setting that still speaks urgently to the present. Nearly two decades later, he returned to Aboriginal affairs.

**War** Two novels dealing with twentieth-century world wars, on the other hand, display considerable insight and power. The diplomats in *Gossip from the Forest*, gathered at Compiègne in the fall of 1918 to negotiate an armistice, are compelling characters. The cultured German delegate, Matthias Erzberger, finds himself in an impossible political bind as he tries to deal with the imperious Marshall Foch, who takes full advantage of his superior position. The tenuous political alliances of the period are reflected in the negotiations at Compiègne, with the tragic realization that an opportunity for lasting peace is lost and another war becomes inevitable. Of greater scope is *Schindler's List*, the true story of a Catholic industrialist who ran an arms factory using Jewish workers from concentration camps.

**Honors** In the decade from 1972 to 1982, from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* to *Schindler's List*, Keneally concentrated on historical fiction, and especially on war. He spent the years from 1975 through 1977 living in the United States, lecturing for a time in Connecticut. The American connection was strengthened in the mid-1980s when he became writer-in-residence at the University of California, Irvine. Later, he became a Distinguished Professor for Life in the University of California system.

## Works in Literary Context

**Historical Fiction** Keneally's work can best be understood as historical fiction. In this genre of writing, historical events are reimagined with artistic liberty in order to breathe life into the events of the past. However, it is important to note that although usually considered fiction, works like *Schindler's List* are painstakingly researched and include only events the author established as factual, though small details such as specific

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Keneally's famous contemporaries include:

**Peter Hoeg** (1957–): Danish novelist who has received international acclaim for his works of magic realism.

**Ted Koppel** (1940–): American journalist and novelist who was a prominent figure in the media until his departure from the news program "Nightline" in 2005.

**Roald Dahl** (1916–1990): English novelist famous for his children's stories, including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The BFG*.

**J. M. Coetzee** (1940–): South African novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Tony Blair** (1953–): English politician who held the office of prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 until 2007.

conversations may have been created by Keneally. In this way, they blur the line between fiction and nonfiction. *Schindler's List* is a good example of such writing, but in many ways Keneally's entire oeuvre seeks to find connections between the past and the present both to enlighten and to entertain.

In some ways, one can link Keneally's historical fiction with writers like William Shakespeare, who spun the five-act play *Julius Caesar* out of the actual death of Julius Caesar at the hands of Brutus. The form has become increasingly important in recent years, and its popularity can be seen in both film and literature. One example is the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which is an adaptation of the Arthur Golden novel of the same name.

**War Novels** In addition to the balanced portrait of Joan of Arc, *Blood Red, Sister Rose* drew critical praise for its realistic depiction of the brutality of medieval warfare. In a number of subsequent works, Keneally approached the subject of war from varying perspectives, including the thoughts of a World War I peace negotiator in *Gossip from the Forest* (1975), the activities of a doctor involved with partisans during World War II in *Season in Purgatory* (1977), and the preparations of American Civil War soldiers for battle in *Confederates* (1979). *The Cut-Rate Kingdom* (1980), set in Canberra in 1942, considers the moral character of military and political leaders in wartime Australia.

In *Gossip from the Forest*, Keneally offered a concentrated fictional presentation of the peace talks that took place in the forest of Compiègne in November 1918, focusing on the highest-ranking German negotiator, Matthias Erzberger, a liberal pacifist. According to the *New York Times Book Review*'s Paul Fussell, *Gossip from the Forest* "is a study of the profoundly civilian and pacific

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The mass murder of millions of Jews and other civilians by the Nazi regime, a horror known as the Holocaust, is a frequent topic for novelists and authors of all types. Here are some works that focus on this tragedy:

*Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), a diary by Anne Frank. This book recounts the life of a girl and her family hiding from the Nazis.

*Night* (1955), a memoir by Elie Wiesel. The author was sixteen when World War II ended and he was released from a concentration camp. *Night* recounts the horrors he experienced during the Holocaust.

*Apt Pupil* (1982), a novella by Stephen King. Later adapted into a film, this novella analyzes the long-term effects of having participated in World War II as a Nazi.

sensibility beleaguered by crude power... it is absorbing, and as history it achieves the kind of significance earned only by sympathy acting on deep knowledge." Robert E. McDowell of *World Literature Today* concluded that "with *Gossip from the Forest* Keneally has succeeded better than in any of his previous books in lighting the lives of historical figures and in convincing us that people are really the events of history."

*Confederates* is counted among Keneally's most ambitious historical undertakings with its faithful representation of the military life of a band of Southern soldiers preparing for the Second Battle of Antietam in the summer of 1862. Covering a range of characters, including slaves, farmers, and aristocrats, the novel, in the opinion of Jeffrey Burke of the *New York Times Book Review*, "reaffirms Mr. Keneally's mastery of narrative voice."

### Works in Critical Context

Although Keneally has received a fair amount of both critical and popular acclaim, he has also been involved in a number of controversies. At one point, for example, Keneally was accused of plagiarism in his novel *Season in Purgatory*. Indeed, controversy even surrounded his astoundingly popular *Schindler's List*.

***The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*** Racism and violence, two social issues that figure prominently in many of Keneally's works, are closely examined in his acclaimed early work *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972). In the novel, Keneally depicts an incident that occurred in New South Wales in 1900 in which a mixed-race Aborigine exploded into a murderous rage following persistent racist treatment by white settlers. Reviewer Anthony Thwaite wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that the novel blends "history, psychological insight, and an

epic adventure with great skill. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* echoes in the head long after it has been put down." The novel, which is based on contemporary newspaper accounts of the tragedy, is also considered an early expression of Keneally's antiassimilationist views of race relations. It won the Heinemann Award of the Royal Society of Literature in 1973.

***Blood Red, Sister Rose: A Novel of the Maid of Orléans*** With Keneally's *Blood Red, Sister Rose: A Novel of the Maid of Orléans* (1974), he turned from writing local history to world history and introduced a recurring interest in warfare into his oeuvre. Critics noted the novel emphasized Joan's everyday qualities within the uncommon context of fifteenth-century warfare. A. G. Mojtabai, in the *New York Times Book Review*, commented on Keneally's unusual choice in retelling such a well-known story. According to Mojtabai, "We all know the story, the big scenes: the Voices, the Dauphin's court, Orleans, Rheims, Rouen, the pyre.... It would seem foolhardy to attempt to revive these worn tales again. Yet Australian novelist Thomas Keneally has done it and carried it off with aplomb. St. Joan lives again, robustly, in a way we have not known her before." Comparing Keneally's portrait of Joan with the religious presentation of her as saintly and with Bernard Shaw's dramatic rendering as earthy and pragmatic, Melvin Maddocks noted in *Time* that Keneally "thoughtfully reconstructs a whole Joan, less spectacular than the first two but decidedly more convincing and perhaps, at last, more moving."

***Schindler's List*** Booker Prize judges wondered whether *Schindler's List* was a novel at all. Only a few years before, Keneally had been embroiled in accusations of plagiarism concerning *Season in Purgatory*. Now he was the subject of speculation as to whether he had written a work of nonfiction that was by definition ineligible for the prize. In the end, the judges decided that Keneally had deployed the skills of his fictive craft in the interest of a work at once compassionate, astonishing, and surprising in its contents and compass. More strife arose when director Steven Spielberg's version of the novel, the Academy Award-winning motion picture *Schindler's List*, was released in 1994. In *Le Monde*, for instance, the self-interested Claude Lanzmann (director of the Holocaust movie *Shoah*) called Spielberg's effort "kitsch melodrama." For his part, Keneally could take pleasure in the fact that no other Booker Prize-winning novel had sold so many copies as his. In 1994—the year the movie was released—the novel sold 873,716 copies in Britain and the Commonwealth alone.

### Responses to Literature

1. Do you feel that director Steven Spielberg's representation of Keneally's *Schindler's List* in his film of the same name is "melodramatic" compared to the

- original work? Use examples from the book and movie to support your position.
2. Keneally was criticized for seemingly taking facts about Oskar Schindler and presenting them as fiction. Recently, other authors (mostly writers of memoirs) have been humiliated for presenting fictional events as fact (James Frey, author of *A Million Little Pieces*, is one example). Using your library and the Internet, find out more about the controversies surrounding recent memoirs that were later shown to be partially or substantially fictional. Also find out more about what writer Truman Capote called “faction”—a literary blend of novelistic elements and facts. Why do you think critics and readers react negatively to books that seem to blend fact and fiction? Do you think writers should have the freedom to create the texts they want to create, or should they stick to one genre or another?
  3. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is written from the point of view of an exploited Aborigine. Keneally has since remarked that he would no longer choose to write from the point of view of his Aborigine protagonist, as it would be “insensitive” of him. Do you think writers should be discouraged from creating characters of a race or gender different from their own? Why or why not?

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## Kenzaburo Oe

BORN: 1935, Ehime, Shikoku, Japan

NATIONALITY: Japanese

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Prize Stock* (1958)

*A Personal Matter* (1964)

*The Silent Cry* (1967)

*An Echo of Heaven* (1989)

*Somersault* (1999)

#### Overview

One of the foremost figures in contemporary Japanese literature, Oe is highly regarded for intensely imagined and formally innovative novels examining the sense of alienation and anxiety among members of the post-



Kenzaburo Oe Kenzaburo Oe, 1999, photograph. AP Images.

World War II generation in Japan. Oe's fiction is both profoundly intellectual and emotionally raw.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Traditional Japanese Upbringing** Born in 1935 in a small village on the western Japanese island of Shikoku, Oe was raised in a prominent samurai family in accordance with traditional Japanese beliefs. Like most Japanese children of his generation, Oe was taught to believe that the emperor was a living god. When Emperor Hirohito personally announced in a radio broadcast Japan's surrender to the Allied military forces, thus marking the conclusion of World War II, Oe and his schoolmates experienced a sense of devastation and disorientation that forever changed their perception of the world.

**Embracing the “Antihero”** While Oe lamented the sense of humiliation and guilt that Japan's defeat and occupation by American troops imposed on his generation, he also embraced the values of democracy that were instilled through the educational system of the occupation forces. While a student at Tokyo University, Oe read widely in traditional Japanese, French, and modern

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Oe's famous contemporaries include:

**Harlan Ellison** (1934–): Ellison is an American fiction and television writer best known for his work on *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966–1969) and *Outer Limits* (1963–1965).

**Wole Soyinka** (1934–): Soyinka is a Nigerian writer considered by many to be Africa's best playwright. In 1986 he became the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Elvis Presley** (1935–1977): Presley was an American musician and actor who has been a major cultural icon since his early career.

**Václav Havel** (1936–): Havel is a Czech writer and politician who served as the last president of Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and the first president of the Czech Republic (1993–2003).

**Don DeLillo** (1936–): DeLillo is an American novelist considered one of the pioneers of postmodern fiction.

**Ryoji Noyori** (1938–): Noyori is a Japanese chemist who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2001.

Western literature. Reflecting his ambitious and erudite reading habits, Oe's early stories were awarded a number of prestigious literary prizes.

**From Student to Professional Writer** While still a university student, Oe established his literary reputation with his first novella, *The Catch* (1958), which tells the story of a Japanese boy and a black American prisoner of war whose friendship is destroyed by the brutality of war. *The Catch* won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, and from this success, Oe moved directly from student to professional writer. Also written in 1958, Oe's first novel, *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids*, explored the impact and influence of World War II on Japanese youth.

**Political Protest** In 1960 Oe married Yukari Ikeuchi, daughter of movie director and essayist Mansaku Itami (pseudonym of Yoshitoyo Ikeuchi). That same year, he became an active participant in the movement protesting revision and renewal of the United States–Japan Security Treaty. On his first foreign excursion as part of a group of Japanese writers, he traveled to China, where he had an audience with Mao Tse-tung. In October, the chairman of the Japan Socialist Party, which was opposed to the Security Treaty, was in the middle of a public speech when he was stabbed to death by a young right-wing radical. Oe was shocked to discover that a member of the postwar generation, born even later than he, could be transformed into an ardent right-wing imperialist.

**Personal Transformation** In 1963 Oe's eldest son, Hikari, was born handicapped with a brain hernia as a result of an abnormality in his skull. This incident came as a shock to Oe both in his personal and literary life. In 1964 he published *Kojinteki na taiken* (translated as *A Personal Matter* in 1968), one of the most important monuments of his literary career, in which a young schoolteacher called Bird dreams of escaping to Africa, but a handicapped child is born to his wife.

In 1994, after his son Hikari had made a name for himself as a composer, Oe stirred up controversy by announcing that, since his son had come to express himself better through his music than he could through writing about him, once he finished the novel he was currently writing, he would abandon the writing of novels. In October of that same year he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

When Oe declared that he was finished with the novel form, he had just passed the age of sixty, which in Japan is customarily viewed as the time for a new departure in one's life. He turned primarily to writing essays. When Oe's close friend Tôru Takemitsu, a famous composer, died of cancer in 1996, Oe mourned and decided to resume his creation in the novel form in memory of Takemitsu. In 1997 Juzô Itami (pseudonym of Yoshiharu Ikeuchi)—a distinguished movie director, Oe's close friend since boyhood, and the brother of Oe's wife—committed suicide by jumping off a building. This incident caused Oe great personal sorrow, and he sought to illuminate the truth of what happened through exploring facts and visionary fictions.

Since the 1990s Oe's name has appeared in the media outside of the literary realm. In 2004, he was cited as opposing controversial changes to the postwar Japanese constitution of 1947. In 2005, he was sued for libel by two military officers in the Japanese army. The controversy centered around his statements that the Japanese army ordered civilians to commit mass suicide during the Okinawa campaign by U.S. military forces rather than be taken as prisoners of war by the U.S. Army. While involved in the case, Oe did not write or publish much. He emerged from silence when the charges against him were dismissed in 2008. Recently, the *New York Times* reported that he has started a new novel that features a character based on his father, who drowned during World War II. At present, Oe lives in Tokyo with his three children.

### Works in Literary Context

Oe is one of the outstanding representatives of contemporary Japanese literature. In a literary career extending over several decades, he has produced a large volume of works, and in Japan he has received several prestigious literary awards, including the Akutagawa Prize (1958), the Tanizaki Jun'ichirô Prize (1967), and the Noma Literary Prize (1973). He has also been highly praised

overseas, receiving the Europelia Award from the European Community (1989), the Italian Mondelosso Prize (1993), and the Nobel Prize in Literature (1994). These works were influenced, in part, by such existentialist philosophers as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, and by the American tradition of the “antihero,” as represented in the works of such authors as Mark Twain, Herman Melville, William Faulkner, and Norman Mailer. Oe’s critical essays have incorporated a variety of writers from the East and the West: Sartre, Mailer, Faulkner, Melville, William Blake, William Butler Yeats, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Miguel de Cervantes, Dante, and Chi-ha. Oe does not imitate these writers; rather he employs what he has learned from them in his own acts of literary creation.

The citation for the Nobel Prize noted that through his “poetic force” Oe “creates an imagined world where life and myth condense to form a disconcerting picture of the human predicament today.” He was likewise hailed for his relentless search for ways in which mankind can survive together beneath the threat of nuclear annihilation, and for his writing about his symbiotic relationship with his handicapped son. His works have been translated into many languages, including English, German, and French.

**Oe’s Structuralism** In 1976, when Oe was forty-one, he spent a brief period lecturing in English at the Colegio de México on postwar Japanese intellectual history. His decision to reside for a time in Mexico served as an opportunity for him to reconsider in clear terms the issue of marginality that had been at the forefront of his consciousness since he first left his village home and to consider it a topic in world history. In the theoretical work he published after his return to Japan, *Shosetsu no hoho* (1978, *Methodology of the Novel*), he conclusively declares, “One must stand on the side of marginality in order to be able to grasp the essence of the dangers attending our contemporary age.”

During this visit, Oe read a book published the previous year by the cultural anthropologist Masao Yamaguchi that enabled him to deepen his consciousness and solidify the methodology behind his structuralist theories while in Mexico. Some deride Oe as a “structuralist-come-lately,” but it is safe to say that for many years he had been an unconscious structuralist, interested in the relationships among various cultural practices as well as in the linguistic connections among the myriad of elements that make up language. Oe’s conscious use of structuralist methodology begins with *Dōjidai gemu*, a work that takes the form of a letter written from a teacher living in Mexico to his twin sister. Oe’s adoption of structuralism in the late 1970s began with the concept of “defamiliarization” in the Russian formalist linguistic theories of Viktor Shklovsky and with the “grotesque realism” of Mikhail Bakhtin. From there, he proceeded to study the structuralist-oriented cultural anthropology of Claude

Lévi-Strauss and the comparative religion theories of Mircea Eliade. His approach to structuralism inspired him to focus his attentions on Europe, where these theories originated. At the same time, as a citizen of Asia, he had a deep-seated interest in the anti-dictatorial poetry of South Korea’s Kim Chi-ha, a body of work which merges art with the fight against political repression and relies on a four-hundred-year-old traditional narrative structure called Pansori to frame its stories.

**Fusing Japanese and Western Culture** Another striking feature of Oe’s writing since the 1980s has been his bold adoption of a literary technique that seems at first glance a return to the traditions of Japanese autobiographical fiction in the *shishō setsu* (I-novel) form. Deeply interlaced with this tradition of autobiographical fiction is another significant thread in Oe’s writing, which involves the simultaneous attempts both to confront and fuse with Western culture.

Oe has produced many works of fiction but has also written essays and critical pieces. In these works Oe appears as a “product of postwar democracy,” as a parent with a handicapped child, and as a supporter of the weaklings who have been oppressed and shunned by harsh reality. He examines the victims of the atomic bombing and discusses the struggles of the people of Okinawa, who continued to suffer under the twenty-seven-year-long American occupation, after the end of World War II. These problems do not represent passing interests for Oe but are, in fact, as the title of one of his essay collections suggests, *Jizoku suru kokorozashi* (1968, *Continuing Hopes*).

Born in the margins of Japan, Kenzaburo Oe has for many years made use of unremitting self-examination as a means of pursuing questions of the periphery and the center as well as the ways in which mankind can live together beneath the nuclear menace. By groping for a pathway to hope in the future, he has never averted his eyes from the despair of the present as he has persistently asked how man should live in the present age. His work has thus contributed significantly not merely to Japanese literature but to the literature of the entire world.

## Works in Critical Context

With the exception of politically and legally motivated criticisms, like the libel lawsuit brought against Oe by two military officers in 2005, critical reaction to Oe’s works has been predominantly adulatory. Despite the minor reservations of some critics with regard to its “happy” ending, *A Personal Matter* was internationally recognized as a masterpiece and a triumph of personal expression—a novel clearly autobiographical in content, but which transcends its literal narrative to symbolize the entire postwar spirit of malaise among Japanese intellectuals. Critic Stephen Iwamoto writes, “The relationship between Kenzaburo Oe and his mentally and

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Characterizing life as profoundly absurd, Oe portrays the unique agonies and dilemmas of his characters with concrete precision in ways that point to the more universal significance of their suffering. Here are some other works with a similar theme:

- The Age of Reason* (1945), a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre. This novel is concerned with the conception of freedom as the ultimate aim of human existence.
- The Plague* (1947), a novel by Albert Camus. This novel faces questions about the human condition through the story of medical workers laboring in a plague-swept city in Algeria.
- Lord of the Flies* (1954), a novel by William Golding. This novel analyzes the unraveling of human culture by following a group of boys stuck on a deserted island as they attempt to govern themselves.

physically handicapped son Hikari has furnished the author with the materials and inspiration for countless works—short stories, novels, lectures, commentaries, and essays.”

Oe’s most universally acclaimed novel, *The Silent Cry* (1967), is a formally innovative and densely poetic portrayal of Takashi and Mitsusaburo, two brothers who clash over their differing interpretations of their tumultuous family history. Utilizing a method of temporal displacement and unity, Oe constructs the narrative as the surreal juxtaposition of a political uprising in 1860 (the year Japan was forced to ratify a treaty opening up commerce with the United States) and the brothers’ struggle a hundred years later. In addition to its complex narrative structure, *The Silent Cry* exhibits a preoccupation with violence and physical deformity that some critics have linked with the methods of “grotesque realism,” a brand of exaggerated satire which was pioneered by the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais. Similarly, it was lauded by the Nobel committee as “Oe’s major mature work,” and its complex narrative framework has been compared with the magic realism of Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez.

Many critics argue that Oe’s deliberate coalescence of modern Western and traditional Japanese forms has made him difficult to interpret and translate in either Japanese or English, and the fact that few of his works have been translated into English has limited the amount of criticism devoted to him outside of Japan. However, because Oe was awarded the Nobel Prize, scholars foresee an influx of academic interest, English translations, and criticism in years to come.

## Responses to Literature

1. Oe has acknowledged that the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre has influenced his own philosophy and literary style. Do the concerns of existentialist philosophy, drawn from a European intellectual movement, strengthen Oe’s novels or distract from their ability to analyze Japanese culture?
2. In his introduction to *The Crazy Iris*, Oe writes that his “anthology of A-bomb short stories is an effort to make the original A-Bomb experiences a part of the shared experiences of peoples throughout the world.” What hurdles do you think a Western reader must overcome to make the atomic bomb truly a “shared experience”? Is it possible for readers from outside Japan to partake in this shared experience? Why or why not?
3. Critics note that Oe combines Western and non-Western perspectives, styles, and concerns in his novels. Brainstorm some particular scenes in Oe’s texts where these Western and non-Western perspectives and styles clash or merge. Then, write an essay describing what effect you think this has on his writing.
4. In his essays, Oe asserts a particular kind of political responsibility shared by authors and activists throughout the world. Write a personal statement about the kinds of political responsibilities you think global citizens share. Are there any responsibilities unique to authors?

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## Imre Kertész

BORN: 1929, Budapest, Hungary

NATIONALITY: Hungarian

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Fateless* (1975)

*Failure* (1988)

*Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (1990)

### Overview

Imre Kertész, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2002, is a strong, independent voice in contemporary Hungarian literature. He is also a witness to the Holocaust, having survived the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps. His novels and essays, written in dry and unsentimental prose, examine the Holocaust as an outgrowth of European cultural traditions. Kertész views the Nazi terror not as an accident or an anomaly in European history but as a link in the chain of totalitarianism (a government that has total control over all aspects of its citizens' lives), a chain that includes the Cold War communism of eastern Europe. His writing is charged with a relentless inquiry into human nature and the lessons of the twentieth century.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Sent to a Nazi Death Camp** Imre Kertész was born on November 9, 1929, in Budapest, in an assimilated, middle-class Jewish family. His father was a timber merchant, and his mother worked as a clerk. His parents divorced around the time of his birth and sent him to a boarding school. World War II broke out as he approached his tenth birthday. A promising student, Kertész enrolled in the newly formed "Jewish class" of the Madach Gymnasium in Budapest in 1940. In the summer of 1944, while he was working as a laborer, he was arrested by the Nazis and sent to a concentration camp. Millions of detainees died in these camps, but Kertész survived the camp, and upon his liberation in 1945, he had the option to start a new life in another country, but chose to return to Hungary.

**A Career as a Writer** Back in Budapest, still in his teens, Kertész became a journalist. He graduated from high school in 1948 and started to work for the Social Democrat journal *Világosság* (*Illumination*), but after the communist party took power in Hungary, it turned the paper into a propaganda organ, and Kertész was fired. He became a factory worker, then was drafted and served in the military until 1953. When discharged, he got married, and determined to live off his writing. The musical comedies on which he collaborated for Budapest theaters paid well enough to give him some financial



Imre Kertész Pascal Le Segretain / Getty Images

independence. Later, he supported himself by translating literature into Hungarian, including philosophical works by Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Kertész read much literature on the Holocaust and studied documents, maps, and photographs. He wanted to comprehend the circumstances that made such a catastrophe possible in European civilization. He resolved to write about his concentration camp experience, but not in the form of a memoir. His first novel, *Fateless* (1975), is a stark portrait of the totalitarian machinery and the methods by which it reduced the individual to a mere functioning unit.

Although Kertész wrote *Fateless* in 1965, it went unpublished for ten years. In communist Hungary, the Holocaust was still a taboo subject. Hungarian publishers and book censors demanded that writers treat the Holocaust as a closed chapter of history, hermetically sealed from the present, and discuss it within the ideological confines of Socialist realism. A viewpoint that depicted the concentration camps as the epitome of the totalitarian system was not welcome in a Soviet-dominated state. Kertész doubted he could find a forum to get his book out, but eventually a leading publishing house released it.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kertész's famous contemporaries include:

**Primo Levi** (1919–1987): Italian writer, chemist, and Holocaust survivor.

**Günter Grass** (1927–): German novelist and playwright; Nobel Prize winner (1999).

**Elie Wiesel** (1928–): Jewish-American writer and concentration camp survivor; Nobel Prize winner (1986).

**Václav Havel** (1936–): Czech playwright, essayist, and politician; last President of Czechoslovakia (1989–1992) and first President of the Czech Republic (1993–2003).

**Martin Luther King Jr.** (1929–1968): An American Civil Rights leader who led the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–1956) and the 1963 March on Washington, where he gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

The novel was published without censorship. It received critical praise upon its release but was not a commercial success. Kertész's standing in the literary community was compromised by his refusal to join the official writers' union of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, throughout the late 1970s he slowly established himself as a writer while supporting himself with translations. He published a volume of short stories, *The Path Finder*, in 1977. In the title story, a concentration camp survivor revisits the camps and encounters a mysterious veiled widow who later takes her own life. This book also includes a novella called *Mystery Story*. Its setting, in a repressive South American country, allows Kertész another vantage point to explore the murderous machineries of totalitarian regimes, in which nobody escapes suspicion and surveillance.

Kertész's second novel, *Failure* (1988), vividly depicts the grimness of life in Budapest under totalitarian rule in the 1950s, just before the 1956 uprising. Its publication reflects the increasing freedom Hungary experienced in the late 1980s. A year after its release, Hungary's ruling party abandoned communism, and the nation became a democratic republic.

**Post-Communist Years** Kertész's first post-Communist novel, *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (1990), tells the story of its narrator's marriage, which fails because the narrator (known only as “B”), who had been in Auschwitz (a notorious Nazi concentration camp), is marked for life by that experience. His young wife wants to raise a family, but the narrator, despite his love for her, is too haunted by his past to participate in the future she desires. The title invokes the Jewish prayer for the dead, which the narrator says for the children he cannot bring himself to sire. *Fateless*, *Failure*, and *Kaddish* are considered a

trilogy, especially in the German literary press; they are connected by the semi-autobiographical details, the description of Hungary in the 1950s, and the concentration camp experience.

Kertész went on to publish fiction, along with diary excerpts and essays. *Holocaust As Culture* (1993) compiles lectures Kertész delivered at international conferences on the Holocaust. In the title essay, he defines the Holocaust as an event in European civilization ranking with the crucifixion. The great European culture, he points out, was of no help to the camp inmates, nor did it inhibit the perpetrators and murderers. The short novel *Liquidation* (2003), originally intended as a drama, turns Kertész's trilogy into a tetralogy. It continues the story of “B” to his final years and suicide. Kertész has said this will be his last work about the Holocaust.

Imre Kertész became more widely recognized and appreciated in Hungary after the demise of socialism. His books were published, some of them in several editions, and translated into numerous languages. He was awarded numerous prizes, culminating with the Nobel Prize in 2002, which brought attention in Hungary not only to his work but to the legacy of the Holocaust. Kertész continues to work and live in Budapest and Berlin.

### Works in Literary Context

Imre Kertész lived isolated from the literary community, teaching himself how to write a novel and discovering the writers who had a great impact on his thinking and writing. He singled out Albert Camus and Franz Kafka as profound influences. He admired Camus's succinct, precise prose, particularly in *The Stranger* (1942). He read philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and was much influenced by German writers, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Thomas Mann. Within the genre of Holocaust literature, he is especially fascinated by those writers who, having survived the catastrophe, later took their own lives: Paul Celan, Jean Amery, Tadeusz Borowski, and Primo Levi. Kertész's *Fateless* is often compared to Levi's *If This Is a Man* because of the dry, precise quality of their observations.

**Totalitarianism and the Individual** Kertész broke a societal taboo in Hungary not only by writing about the Holocaust but also by writing from a perspective that sharply differed from convention. He regards the Holocaust as the failure of European culture rather than a particularly Jewish catastrophe. For Kertész, the rationalist organization of state power, supported by generations of educated and erudite Europeans, reaches its logical conclusion in the “world experience,” of Auschwitz. The concentration camps represent the rule, not the exception, in European civilization.

Thus, Kertész aims to delineate the precise methods by which the machinery of power transforms the

individual into a mere functional entity. His Nobel Prize citation praises him for “writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history.” This theme is evident in the short work *Sworn Statement* (1993), which describes a humiliating experience the author had while detained at the Austrian border. His bitter description of the mindless, rigid bureaucratic obedience to rules, and the total disregard of the individual, recalls the spirit of the camps. A faceless, blind mechanism is at work, one that reduces personalities to cases, files, and, according to the logic of the system, inevitably, corpses.

**Atonal Language** To express the disintegration of the human being in the totalitarian system, Kertész had to find a language that could accurately convey the horror of what had happened. To this end, he invented a dispassionate language that captures the utterly indifferent universe of a totalitarian state. His prose completely avoids sentimental appeals or expressions of moral outrage; furthermore, it eschews action, character, and expressive language. Alluding to modernist musical composition, Kertész has said his aim was to create an “atonal” literary style.

### Works in Critical Context

At the time he received the Nobel Prize, Imre Kertész was almost completely unknown in the United States. Very little of his work had been translated into English. Even in his home country, his works were not widely read. He has remained an outsider to the Hungarian cultural scene. *Fateless* received limited attention in literary circles at the time of its publication, although it was eventually recognized as an important novel, and won several overseas prizes. Kertész gained a larger public profile after the fall of communism, and became recognized as one of the most important writers in his own country, if not one of the most popular. In 1998, he was awarded the Kossuth Díj, Hungary’s highest cultural prize. He has gained a loyal audience in Germany and Sweden; a German publisher released the complete edition of his body of work in 1999. Very little has been written about his work by scholars in the English-speaking world.

The news that Kertész had been awarded the Nobel Prize elicited a mixed response in Hungary. There was official jubilation and pride, but also some expression of disappointment that the honor had gone to a relatively obscure writer, and a Jew—whom right-wing nationalists therefore did not accept as “truly” Hungarian. Kertész himself believes that the Hungarian people have never come to terms with their own participation in the Holocaust and thus continue to shun any public discussion of its historical importance.

### Responses to Literature

1. Research the history of Communism in Hungary. Choose a few salient features of Hungarian life in the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The work of Imre Kertész incisively skewers the psychological dimensions of totalitarianism, honing in on the human qualities that allow catastrophes like the Holocaust, and power structures like the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, to occur. This potent theme of twentieth-century literature is explored in fiction and nonfiction works, such as the following:

*The Trial* (1925), a novel by Franz Kafka. This novel of bureaucratic horror is a Kafka classic.

*The Man Without Qualities* (1943), a novel by Robert Musil. This masterpiece, a novel in three volumes, has a protagonist, Ulrich, who is characterized by indifference and passivity.

*The Technological Society* (1954), a nonfiction work by Jacques Ellul. This far-reaching social critique argues that a high-tech society stresses efficiency above all other values, including moral values.

*Crowds and Power* (1960), a nonfiction work by Elias Canetti. This work of mass psychology studies how crowds behave and why they follow leaders, including demagogues like Hitler.

*Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), a nonfiction work by Hannah Arendt. This book introduces the phrase “the banality of evil” to argue that evil can result from mass conformity and passive obedience to authority.

writings of Kertész that you have read and share them in a brief report to the class.

2. In an essay, compare Kertész’s *Fateless* to other works depicting the camps, such as the writings of Primo Levi or Elie Wiesel. Use examples from the texts to support your ideas.
3. With a classmate, define the term “atonal.” Then, identify the qualities of “atonal” language in *Fateless* or other works by Kertész that you have read.
4. Even though Kertész is the first Hungarian writer to win the Nobel Prize, not all Hungarians consider him a national hero. Research Kertész on the Internet or using your library and write a report about why you think he is a controversial figure in his home country.
5. Kertész writes about the ways that Holocaust survivors are forever haunted by their experiences in the camps. Write an informal essay describing what new insights you have about living through trauma.

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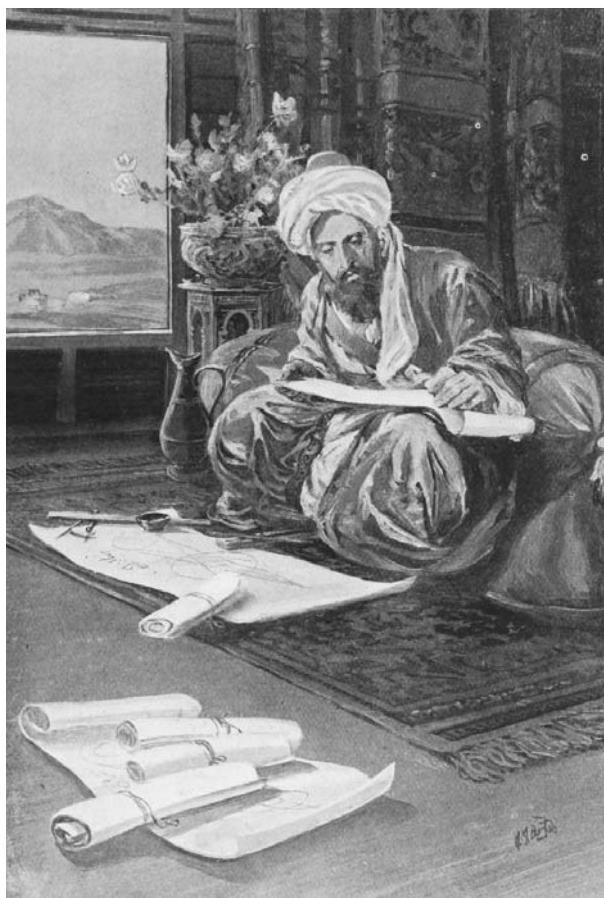
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Omar Khayyám © Bettmann / CORBIS

## ❖ Omar Khayyám

BORN: 1048, Neyshabur, Persia

DIED: 1131, Neyshabur, Persia

NATIONALITY: Persian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Rubáiyát* (1859)

### Overview

During his lifetime as a mathematician and astronomer in Persia, Omar Khayyám was renowned for his scientific achievements, but he was not recognized as a poet. Not until scholar and poet Edward FitzGerald translated the Persian manuscript of Khayyám's verse into English in 1859 did the Western world discover Khayyám's lyrics. Today, Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*, a collection of quatrains composed in the traditional Persian *rubai* style, is recognized throughout the West. Both sensual and spiritual, the *Rubáiyát* has remained powerfully poignant because it appeals to humankind's deepest passions and most profound philosophical concerns.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Obscure Early Life** Khayyám was born in 1048 in Neyshabur, Persia, what is now northeastern Iran. At the time, Neyshabur was a commercially wealthy province, as well as an important intellectual, political, and religious center. At the time, Persia was ruled by the Turks who had conquered the territory in 1037 bringing with them their Islamic faith. They remained in control of the region until the early 1200s. While little is known of Khayyám's early life, it is believed that he received an education emphasizing science, mathematics, and philosophy from the celebrated teacher Iman Mowaffak in Neyshabur.

In his early twenties, Khayyám traveled to Samarkand, where he completed his famous treatise on algebra, a work that is considered one of the most outstanding mathematical achievements of the medieval period. His mathematical writings include a study titled *The Difficulties of Euclid's Definitions* (1077). In these works, Khayyám attempts to classify equations, particularly quadratic and cubic equations.

**Royal Assignments** In 1074, Khayyám returned to Neyshabur and was invited by the Sultan Malik-Shah, the Seljuk Turkish ruler, to join a group of eight scholars assigned to reform the Muslim calendar. The result, the Jalai solar calendar, is noteworthy because it is more accurate than the Julian calendar and almost as precise as Pope Gregory XIII's revision of the Julian calendar. During this time, Khayyám was also commissioned, along with other astronomers, to collaborate on a plan for an observatory in the capital city of Isfahan. At this time, the city was one of the most important in the world.

**Death of Malik-Shah** Records indicate that after the death of Malik-Shah in 1092, Khayyám, deeply mourning the loss, went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Translated by Edward FitzGerald, one poem that appears to have been written at this time reads: "Khayyám, who stitched the tents of science / Has fallen in grief's furnace and been sudden burned." Until his death on December 4, 1131, Khayyám spent the rest of his life in the key city of Neyshabur, where he taught astrology and mathematics and predicted future events for the royal court when called upon to do so.

**Poet?** No record exists to indicate that Khayyám ever wrote poetry. Certainly his achievements in mathematics and astronomy eclipsed any in poetry during his own lifetime. Because manuscripts of his quatrains did not appear until two hundred years after his death and because of the differences among the various versions, some scholars doubt that he is the author of the *Rubáiyát*. This argument is strengthened by the fact that the content of the *Rubáiyát* is inconsistent, as some poems are mystical and philosophical, while others are amoral and hedonistic. Having exhaustively studied the work in an effort to determine which of the nearly one thousand quatrains were written by Khayyám, some Persian academics have claimed that only around two hundred and fifty stanzas could be those of Khayyám. Nevertheless, Khayyám's credibility as a poet appears strong, as numerous translations of the *Rubáiyát* have been published throughout the years.

**Discovery and Dissemination** Discovered by English Persian scholar E. B. Cowell at Oxford's Bodleian Library, a fifteenth-century manuscript of Khayyám's verse was passed to Edward FitzGerald, who translated 75 of the 158 quatrains into English. Concerned that the sensual and atheistic aspects of several of the stanzas would offend readers, FitzGerald included those pieces in their original Persian language. When FitzGerald anonymously published his 1859 translation at his own expense, not even a single copy of the book sold.

Only when a bookseller demoted the *Rubáiyát* of *Omar Khayyám* to his store's penny box on the street did the collection gain any attention. In 1861, Whitley Stokes, an editor of the *Saturday Review*, purchased several copies of the *Rubáiyát*, and, impressed by the work, passed a copy along to pre-Raphaelite painter and

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Khayyám's famous contemporaries include:

**Saint Anselm** (1033–1109): Besides being one of the fathers of scholastic theology, Anselm originated the ontological argument for the existence of God. His works include *Monologion* (1075–1076).

**Henry IV** (1050–1106): German king and Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV was beloved by his subjects because of his concern for the peace of the empire and his care for the welfare of the common people.

**Lanfranc** (1015–1089): A Lombard who became archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc played an important role in persuading Pope Alexander II to support the Norman invasion of England in 1066.

**Ernulf** (1040–1124): The bishop of Rochester, Ernulf is credited with compiling laws, papal decrees, and documents relating to the church of Rochester in a collection titled *Textus Roffensis*.

**Malik-Shah** (1055–1092): Malik-Shah was the third and most famous of the Seljuk Turkish sultans, a ruling military family that founded an empire that included Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, and most of Iran.

**Rodrigo Diaz** (1040–1099): Known as El Cid, or "the chief," Diaz was a national hero of Spain and a central military figure in the fight against the Moors.

**Constantine the African** (1020–1087): This Carthaginian was a translator of the Greek and Islamic medical texts that contributed to the twelfth-century establishment of the first medical university, located in Salerno, part of the Kingdom of Sicily. His translations include *Kitab* (1087), also known as *The Complete Book of the Medical Art*.

poet, Dante Rossetti. Rossetti, in turn, gave a copy to poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, who then shared it with writer George Meredith.

Unknown in the Western world before its pre-Raphaelite readership, the *Rubáiyát* became an enormous success in English and American literary circles. Shortly afterwards, the FitzGerald translation created a sensation when it reached the general public. As a result, scholars began searching for additional manuscripts of Khayyám's work, and countless translations followed, each of them different in content, form, and the number of quatrains.

### Works in Literary Context

As a literary genre, *rubaí*—the poetic form of the *Rubáiyát*—was highly popular during the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Persia, inspiring such poets as Rumi,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Khayyám's *Rubáiyát*, a collection of quatrains composed in the traditional Persian rubái style, gave life to a genre that has inspired poets throughout the centuries. Listed below are works in which the use of quatrains can be observed as a literary device:

*Centuries* (1555), a collection of prophecies by Nostradamus. Composed of 353 quatrains written in a mixture of French, Latin, and Greek, *Centuries* describes events from the mid-1500s to 3797, Nostradamus's predicted year for the end of the world.

*The Essential Rumi* (1995), a book of poetry by Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks. Rumi was a thirteenth-century Persian poet. In this collection, Barks translates Rumi's sixteen hundred rubáiyát, quatrains conveying Rumi's mysticism and spirituality.

*Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (published in 1988, written in the 1850s and 1860s), a collection of poems by Emily Dickinson, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd and T. W. Higginson. Dickinson most often created stanzas of quatrains characterized by a unique emphasis on words established through their line position or capitalization. Most of her poems were published posthumously.

who has earned the reputation of being a great spiritual poet.

**Rubái Stanzas** The rubái is a poetic form originating from the Urdu-Persian language. Typically, each rubái stanza consists of four rhyming lines, sometimes referred to as *interlocking Rubáiyát*. However, in Khayyám's poetry, the third line does not rhyme with lines one, two, and four, thus forming an AABA rhyme scheme. Each quatrain of the *Rubáiyát* forms a complete thought. In general, the first two lines pose a situation or problem, usually presented through metaphor or simile. The third line creates suspense, followed by the fourth, which offers some kind of resolution.

The quatrains typically credited to Khayyám share stylistic simplicity and conciseness. Thematically, the *Rubáiyát* is complex and meditative, revealing despair over the brevity of life, impatience with the ignorance of man, and doubt in the existence of a benevolent God. Such pessimism, however, is tempered by a sensual, self-gratifying approach to life, acting as if every day could be one's last. Without a doubt, the *Rubáiyát* demonstrates the inherent contradiction between the sadness and joy of life.

**Affront to Islam** The *Rubáiyát* is considered to be a meditation on the meaning of life, as Khayyám addressed the eternal questions of life, death, religion, and the

puzzles of the universe. Because Khayyám's work was often viewed as heretical by orthodox Muslims for its hedonism, including its praise of wine, the *Rubáiyát* was most likely circulated anonymously, probably memorized and passed along more frequently than it was written down. Evidence indicates that the *Rubáiyát* were almost certainly sung at mystical gatherings.

**Influence** The best-known Persian poet in the West, Khayyám has significantly influenced the style and themes of many poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Praised for its lyrical form and moving insight, the *Rubáiyát* was imitated by such poets as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

### Works in Critical Context

Little is known about the reception of Khayyám's poetry prior to the nineteenth century. It was the commercial success of FitzGerald's translation of the *Rubáiyát* that gave rise to a critical reaction rivaling that given to major classical poets. In the beginning, academics were basically attracted to the lyricism of the *Rubáiyát*. However, attention shifted to Khayyám's themes of fatalism and escapism toward the end of the nineteenth century. In a piece appearing in *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, volume 1: *From Zoroaster to Omar Khayyám*, nineteenth-century critic A. B. Houghton explained the contemporary world's attraction to Khayyám: "He lost all hope just as our hearts are losing hope also. He found behind the phenomenal world a mere nothing at all just as modern scholars have also found. In a word, Omar appeals to our despair."

**FitzGerald's Version** Twentieth-century critics have increasingly studied Khayyám's *Rubáiyát* and FitzGerald's translation as two separate works. Intellectuals differ in their judgment of how FitzGerald distorts Khayyám's original manuscript, some believing that the result of FitzGerald's version is simply an English poem with Persian allusions. Besides including several poems written by other Persian poets, FitzGerald's translation adapts many of the quatrains to suit Victorian tastes. In addition, FitzGerald reorganized the structure of the *Rubáiyát*, fusing Khayyám's conceptually independent verses into one long stanza. Charles Eliot Norton determines that FitzGerald "is to be called 'translator' only in default of a better word, one which should express the poetic transmutation of a poetic spirit from one language to another, and the re-presentation of the ideas and images of the original in a form not altogether diverse from their own, but perfectly adapted to the new conditions of time, place, custom and habit of mind in which they appear."

### Responses to Literature

1. Why do you think the *Rubáiyát* has been translated so many different times? How do recent translations compare with that of FitzGerald? What criteria

- would you establish to evaluate whether one translation is better than another? Write a paper explaining your conclusions.
2. What connection exists between poet and translator? Besides the *Rubáiyát* itself, what do you believe connects FitzGerald and Khayyám? To translate a poet, do you think the translator must be a poet? Must a translator share the same view of the world and sense of language of the author in order to translate that writer's work? Create a presentation which outlines your beliefs on the questions raised.
  3. Examine FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, analyzing the volume's illustrations. Pretend you are an art critic for the *New York Times* and write a review appraising the visual art in FitzGerald's work.
  4. Some scholars argue that Khayyám followed Sufism, a Muslim form of religious mysticism. Research Sufism, noting its humanistic message. Are you surprised to find an element of mysticism embedded in Islam? To what extent do Khayyám's quatrains illustrate principles of Sufism? Write a paper that offers your conclusions.

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## Thomas Kinsella

BORN: 1928, Dublin, Ireland

NATIONALITY: Irish

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Another September* (1958)

*Downstream* (1962)

*Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968)

*Notes from the Land of the Dead and Other Poems* (1973)

*Peppercanister Poems 1972–1978* (1979)

## Overview

One of a number of young Irishmen who began to write in the years following World War II, Thomas Kinsella has played a major role in invigorating the world of contemporary Irish verse. His technical skill and the originality of his subject matter set him apart from his contemporaries.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***The Son of a Dublin Socialist, a Civil Servant Turns to Poetry*** Born in Dublin to John Paul and Agnes Casserley Kinsella, Thomas Kinsella is the son of what he considered a typical Dublin family. His father, a Dublin man, was a lifelong socialist, a member of the Labour party and the Left Book Club. A series of grants and scholarships enabled Thomas to attend University College, Dublin. In 1946 he joined the civil service of Ireland. Two important relationships were formed during his post-university years—his friendship with Sean Oriada, who became Ireland's leading musician and composer and was a much-loved participant in the poet's growing intellectual life, and his relationship with Eleanor Walsh, whom Kinsella married on December 28, 1955. Kinsella had been writing in private for some time when in 1952 he met Liam Miller, founder of the Dolmen Press; between 1952 and 1956 Miller published several pieces of Kinsella's work, and Kinsella became a director of the press.

***Early Success and Residence in America*** In 1958 Dolmen Press published *Another September*, Kinsella's first major collection, which in addition to being awarded the Guinness Poetry Prize for the year was made a Poetry Book Society selection. For the next few years, Kinsella pursued his duties in the finance department of the Irish civil service and had his verse published in periodicals in

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kinsella's famous contemporaries include:

**Ian Paisley** (1926–): Religious and political leader in Northern Ireland, Paisley was a staunch Unionist, a defender of the union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. He served as first minister of Northern Ireland from May 2007 to May 2008.

**Seamus Heaney** (1939–): Irish poet and winner of the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Edward Heath** (1916–2005): Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1970 to 1974, a period of escalation of violence between political factions in Northern Ireland.

**Nuala O'Faolain** (1940–2008): Irish writer renowned for her memoirs *Are You Somebody?* (1996) and *Almost There* (2003).

Ireland and abroad. By 1962, though, he had already produced enough significant new work for another collection, *Downstream*.

The year after *Downstream* appeared, Kinsella was able to take a leave of absence from the finance department, where he was by then assistant principal officer. Though he had not initially planned on staying away permanently, in 1965 the poet—by then a member of the Irish Academy of Letters—made a major change in his life, accepting an invitation from Southern Illinois University to join its faculty as poet in residence. Being Ireland's leading young poet was no longer a part-time job.

He was awarded the Denis Devlin Memorial for his 1966 volume *Wormwood* and became professor of English at Southern Illinois shortly thereafter, subsequently publishing another new volume, *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968).

**Reaction to "Bloody Sunday"** *Nightwalker and Other Poems* was published while the poet was on a Guggenheim Fellowship, granted for the pursuit of his translation of *Táin Bo Cualinghe*, the Old Irish saga, on which he had been working more or less casually for some time. He continued his own writing as well, and the years following *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, Kinsella produced a steady stream of significant poems. The *Táin* was published in 1969; several major poems appeared in periodicals that year and the next, and in 1971 the Kinsellas left Carbondale, Illinois, to take up residence near Philadelphia, where the poet was named professor of English at Temple University. He had by now won the Devlin Award for the second time (1971). The following year saw the completion of several key poems: One of these, "Butcher's Dozen," was written

in the white heat of rage after the shooting of thirteen Irish civil rights marchers by British paratroopers in 1972—a moment in Northern Ireland's struggle for liberation from British colonialism known as "Bloody Sunday." Bloody Sunday was a particularly significant day in the troubles in Northern Ireland, where the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) waged an armed struggle against British control of the region. To many Irish the prospect of British soldiers firing on and killing unarmed youths motivated them to support and even join in the efforts of the IRA. In this same year, Kinsella set up the Peppercanister Press, a small publishing program operating out of his home in Dublin, where he lived when not teaching at Temple University. Its main function was to provide for limited printings of his works in progress. The first fruit along these lines was the collection *Notes from the Land of the Dead and Other Poems*, published in 1973.

**Thematic Evolution** *Notes from the Land of the Dead and Other Poems* is markedly different from Kinsella's earlier books. The poems are a species of mythmaking wherein the poet reaches back into his psychic and familial past to find his fuller self. Kinsella's preoccupation with Ireland and its past had been growing for some time, and would culminate in his 1976 founding of Temple University's School of Irish Tradition in Dublin. In this, Kinsella was part of a movement within Ireland to protect and cherish a heritage that had been systematically neglected and even to an extent considered destroyed by the British. Taking the directorship of the program also enabled Kinsella to continue dividing the academic year between Philadelphia and his native city, and the succeeding years have seen no decrease in his interest in the affairs of Ireland. In addition to publishing numerous collections of poems, Kinsella had the honor of receiving the keys to the city of Dublin in 2007.

### Works in Literary Context

According to Thomas H. Jackson in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Kinsella "has explored Irish themes more and more in his later verse, but primarily in terms of exploring his own consciousness and consciousness in general." His poems since 1956, Jackson writes, have been "almost entirely lyrical—have dealt with love, death and the artistic act; with persons and relationships, places and objects, seen against the world's processes of growth, maturing and extinction." That is, Kinsella's career has traced an arc that moves from the personal, through the political, and back to the personal in its deepest sense—the personal as an expression of and engagement with universal themes and difficulties. Fittingly, the major influences on his work moved from W. H. Auden to William Carlos Williams, before—in later years—he began developing something visibly his own.

**Death and Loss** Kinsella is a poet of absences. Death and other departures are central to his bleak vision. In the

fractured lyrics of his earlier books, doomed love looms large, creating a persona in the poetry that is appalled but passive. As Kinsella's work develops, however, the persona becomes more active, enabling the losses to be presented more dramatically, creating tension. The isolated figure in poems such as "Baggot Street Deserta," "Dick King," and "A Country Walk" becomes progressively more involved with loss and its consequences. And the losses themselves are embodied in a more far-reaching model of human attachment, namely death. In addition to personal losses through death, the death of culture and the death of the past also become more insistent motifs as Kinsella's output broadens and deepens. In particular, the death of the past has been a matter of special emphasis for Kinsella, as is confirmed by his sustained attempt to recover and make available through translation the tradition of poetry in the Irish language.

**Order from Ordeal** Alongside Kinsella's confession that his vision of human existence is that it is "an ordeal," stands the poet's equally honest desire to believe in what he has called "the eliciting of order from experience." Kinsella's verse is a continuing appeal to the strength and justification of such a belief. His poetry is a commitment to make the leap of artistic faith that alone can overcome the abyss of unknowing that is mortality and death. The human potential to achieve that act of composed and graceful suspension is what gives Kinsella's poetry its vitality. His antiromantic conception of poetry, which entails darkness rather than fire, identifies Kinsella as a crucial reviser of the Irish poetic tradition.

### Works in Critical Context

Calvin Bedient maintains in the *New York Times Book Review* that Thomas Kinsella "can hardly write a worthless poem." And he is "probably the most accomplished, fluent, and ambitious Irish poet of the younger generation," according to *New York Times Book Review* critic John Montague. Kinsella, writes M. L. Rosenthal in *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*, "seems to me to have the most distinctive voice of his generation in Ireland, though it is also the most versatile and the most sensitive to 'outside' influences."

**Nightwalker and Other Poems** Upon its publication in 1968, *Nightwalker and Other Poems* was most enthusiastically received. Ralph Mills observes in *Poetry*, "By tremendous strength of word and image [Kinsella] has succeeded magnificently in transmuting personal bitterness and despair into durable poems." Martin Dods-worth, for the *Listener*, was equally approving: "All through *Nightwalker* the qualifications one might make melt away before the superior force with which the poems are shaped as a whole. The faults arise from excess of talent, not from the opposite." If this comment faintly echoes earlier critics' concerns about Kinsella's facility of expression, Marius Bewley's praise in *Hudson Review* for one of the poems in the *Wormwood* group clearly does

### COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Kinsella's poetry often touches on themes of loss. Other works in a similar vein include:

"Moon Crossing Bridge" (1992), a collection of poetry by Tess Gallagher. Gallagher wrote the poems in this collection after the death of her husband, writer Raymond Carver, both celebrating their life together and offering a profound reflection on his passing and the feelings of loss and emptiness with which she was left.

"Annabel Lee" (1849), a poem by Edgar Allan Poe. One of Poe's best-known poems—second only perhaps to "The Raven," which deals with similar themes—this work focuses on one of Poe's favorite subjects: the death of a beautiful young woman and the emptiness and despair felt by her lover afterward. Unlike in "The Raven," however, the poem sounds a hopeful—if also macabre—note: One day, the narrator will be reunited with his lost love.

"Funeral Blues" (1936), a poem by W. H. Auden. Auden had a tremendous influence on Kinsella's early poetry. This poem, with its famous first line ("Stop all the clocks"), is a meditation on death and loss, often read during times of mourning.

*Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Despair* (1924), a collection of poems by Pablo Neruda. The collection that made Neruda famous at the young age of 19, it contains his heartrending reflections on the passing of love, "Tonight I Can Write."

not. "I cannot think of a short passage of poetry," Bewley writes, "in which so many complex and tangled emotions find such concentrated expression . . . all resolved at last through an acceptance in love." Montague was one of the few critics unimpressed with the collection, feeling that Kinsella had not developed any new strategy for dealing with the "cliché" of "urban discontent," and complaining that the persona of "Nightwalker" was "depressingly close to early [T. S.] Eliot."

**Notes from the Land of the Dead and Other Poems** With the release of *Notes from the Land of the Dead and Other Poems*, critical reception was almost as complicated as the poetry; the book called forth some of the most laudatory and most scathing criticism Kinsella had so far attracted. The difficulty of the verse left some critics nonplussed or unhappy. *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer Christopher Wright complained of the poems' opacity, charging that Kinsella's "images fail to construct a consistent and coherent para-reality." One academic critic, writing in *Poetry*, dismissed the whole book out of hand, irritated by what he felt to be its unfinished obscurity.

Conversely, an anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* offered the thought that “beset by this central blankness, several of the poems stagger to a halt, lapse into broken phrases or totter finally into silence; but there is no doubting the control with which these effects are brought off.” The book also called forth one of the best pieces of Kinsella criticism to date, a long review by Vernon Young in *Parnassus* that is perhaps still the fullest and most knowing individual treatment of Kinsella’s work.

## Responses to Literature

1. Kinsella was influenced by the writings of psychologist Carl Jung, particularly what he had to say about universal archetypes. Research Jungian archetypes and explore their role in Kinsella’s poetry. How is Kinsella relying on this concept? In what ways might his poetry challenge the idea? Support your thesis with detailed analysis of segments from the poems themselves.
2. Both Kinsella’s poem “Butcher’s Dozen” and the Irish band U2’s song “Sunday Bloody Sunday” discuss the 1972 shooting of Irish marchers by British soldiers. How do the two works differ in their discussion of the event? How are they similar? Research the actual historical event and then discuss how the lyric descriptions reflect and/or distort the differing accounts of it.
3. Kinsella’s translation of the *Táin* remains the standard today. Select a passage from Kinsella’s translation and compare it to the same passages in other translations of the *Táin*. How do the translations differ? Which do you prefer and why?
4. It has been said that Kinsella was not able to write about Ireland until he left it. This phenomenon has been observed in other Irish writers as well. Research some of these other Irish expatriates and their experiences. Why do you think so many Irish artists require distance from their homeland before they can describe it? Is there something specifically Irish about this, or is it reflective of a phenomenon that would be true for many cultures?

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## Rudyard Kipling

BORN: 1865, *Bombay (now Mumbai), India*

DIED: 1936, *London, England*

NATIONALITY: *British*

GENRE: *Fiction, short stories, poetry*

MAJOR WORKS:

“Gunga Din” (1892)

*The Jungle Book* (1894)

*Captains Courageous* (1897)

*Kim* (1901)

*Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902)

## Overview

It is easy to underestimate the variety, complexity, and subtlety of British author Rudyard Kipling’s writing. He became an extraordinarily popular writer in the 1890s with short stories and poems enlivened by strange and interesting settings, a brisk narrative, and the fresh energy of the voices that told his tales. Credited with popularizing the short-fiction genre in England, Kipling is perhaps most famous for his insightful stories of Indian culture and Anglo-Indian society and for his masterly, widely read stories for children.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Born in British Colony** Kipling was born on December 30, 1865, in Bombay, India, where his father was professor of architectural sculpture in the School of Art. At the time, India was a colony of Great Britain, as at least parts of it had been since the early seventeenth century when the British East India Company gained control of some of its territory. Resentment of British authority and British disregard for Indian religious law led to the first open demonstration for independence in 1857. Though the rebellion was suppressed, the Government of India Act of 1858 gave India some rights, improved the country’s administration, and gave Indians the right to serve as counselors to the viceroy (the person appointed by the British monarch to govern India). Despite these small measures, India remained firmly in



Rudyard Kipling *Kipling, Rudyard, photograph. Source unknown.*

British control and economic exploitation had only increased by the time Kipling was born.

**Educated in England** In 1871, Kipling was sent to England for his education. He entered the United Services College at Westward Ho!—a boarding school in Devon—in 1878. There, young “Gigger” endured bullying and harsh discipline but also enjoyed the close friendships, practical jokes, and merry pranks he later recorded in *Stalky & Co.* (1899). Headmaster Price encouraged Kipling’s literary ambitions by having him edit the school paper and praising the poems Kipling wrote for it. When Kipling sent some of these to India, his father had them privately printed as *Schoolboy Lyrics* (1881), Kipling’s first published work.

In 1882, Kipling rejoined his parents in Lahore, a Muslim city in what would later become Pakistan, and became a subeditor for the *Civil and Military Gazette*. In 1887, he moved to the *Allahabad Pioneer*, a better paper that gave him greater liberty in his writing. The result was a flood of satiric verses, published as *Departmental Ditties* in 1886, and over seventy short stories published in 1888 in seven paperback volumes. In style, the stories showed the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, Bret Harte, and Guy de

Maupassant, but the subjects were Kipling’s own. His stories focused on Anglo-Indian society, which he readily criticized with an acid pen, and the life of the common British soldier and the Indian native, which he portrayed accurately and sympathetically.

In the 1880s, there was an increased call for Indian independence. Because the colonial overlords turned over large areas of India from rice cultivation to cotton farming in this period, the Indian food supply was endangered, but British factories had more raw materials for their textile factories. The British further impoverished India by destroying its native textile industry by flooding the market with cheaper, tariff-free British products. Because of such situations, Indians founded the Indian National Congress in 1885 to express their desires and to make plans for achieving independence.

**Fame in England and America** In 1889, Kipling took a long voyage through China, Japan, and the United States. When he reached London, he found that his stories had preceded him and established him as a brilliant new author. He was readily accepted into the circle of leading writers, including William Ernest Henley, Thomas Hardy, George Saintsbury, and Andrew Lang. For Henley’s *Scots Observer*, he wrote a number of stories and some of his best-remembered poems: “A Ballad of East and West,” “Mandalay,” and “The English Flag.” He also introduced English readers to a “new genre” of serious poems in Cockney dialect: “Danny Deever,” “Tommy,” “Fuzzy-Wuzzy,” and “Gunga Din.” Kipling’s first novel, *The Light That Failed* (1891), was unsuccessful. But when his stories were collected as *Life’s Handicap* (1891) and poems as *Barrackroom Ballads* (1892), Kipling replaced Lord Tennyson as the most popular English author.

In 1892, Kipling married Caroline Balestier, an American. They settled on the Balestier estate near Brattleboro, Vermont, and began four of the happiest years of Kipling’s life, during which he wrote some of his best work, including *Many Inventions* (1893), perhaps his best volume of short stories; *The Jungle Book* (1894), and *The Second Jungle Book* (1895). These works not only assured Kipling’s lasting fame as a serious writer but also made him a rich man.

**His Imperialism** In 1897 the Kiplings settled in Rottingdean, a village on the English coast near Brighton. The outbreak of the Spanish-American War (fought to free Cuba from Spanish colonial rule as well as to assert the growing power of the United States) in 1898 and the Boer War (a conflict in South Africa between British colonial rule and Dutch settlers for control of the country) in 1899 turned Kipling’s attention to colonial affairs. He began to publish a number of solemn poems in the *London Times*. The most famous of these, “Recessional” (1897), issued a warning to Englishmen to consider their accomplishments in the Diamond Jubilee year of Queen

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kipling's famous contemporaries include:

**Edward VII** (1841–1910): The British monarch who gave his name to the brief Edwardian period, at the turn of the twentieth century.

**Lillie Langtry** (1853–1929): A successful British actress (a sometime mistress to the future King Edward VII), Langtry made a wildly successful dramatic tour of America in 1882.

**Theodore Roosevelt** (1858–1919): Naturalist, explorer, hunter, governor of New York, and twenty-sixth president of the United States, Roosevelt was a firm believer in "gunboat diplomacy" and overseas adventures. He and Kipling met at the White House on several occasions.

**W. E. B. DuBois** (1868–1963): An African-American civil rights activist, author of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Victoria's reign with humility and awe rather than pride and arrogance.

The equally well-known "White Man's Burden" (1899) clearly expressed the attitudes toward empire implicit in the stories in *The Day's Work* (1898) and *A Fleet in Being* (1898). He referred to less highly developed peoples as "lesser breeds" and considered order, discipline, sacrifice, and humility to be the essential qualities of colonial rulers. These views have been denounced as racist, elitist, and jingoistic. For Kipling, the term "white man" indicated citizens of the more highly developed nations, whose duty it was to spread law, literacy, and morality throughout the world.

**Commented on Spanish-American War** The Spanish-American War provoked Kipling to write for vice president Theodore Roosevelt a poem with the now offensive title "The White Man's Burden." Its message was typical for Kipling. Seeing that America suddenly had acquired vast new colonial possessions from its defeat of Spain, thus joining the European powers in their race to colonize the rest of the world, Kipling argued that it was the responsibility of the United States to care for its new subjects liberally and humanely, if also as effective owners or wardens. Roosevelt reportedly responded, though not to Kipling, "Rather poor poetry, but good sense from the expansionist viewpoint."

During the Boer War, Kipling spent several months in South Africa, where he raised funds for soldiers' relief and worked on an army newspaper, the *Friend*. In 1901, Kipling published *Kim*, the last and most charming of his

portrayals of Indian life. But anti-imperialist reaction following the end of the Boer War caused a decline in Kipling's popularity. When he published *The Five Nations*, a book of South African verse, in 1903, he was attacked in parodies, caricatures, and serious protests as the opponent of a growing spirit of peace and democratic equality. Kipling then retired to "Bateman's," a house near Burwash, a secluded village in Essex, England.

**Later Works** Kipling now turned from the wide empire as subject to England itself. In 1902, he published *Just So Stories for Little Children*. He also issued two books of stories of England's past, intended, like the *Jungle Books*, for young readers but suitable for adults as well: *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910).

His most significant work was a number of volumes of short stories written in a new style: *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904), *Actions and Reactions* (1904), *A Diversity of Creatures* (1917), *Debits and Credits* (1926), and *Limits and Renewals* (1932). These later stories treat more complex, subtle, and somber subjects in a style more compressed, allusive, and elliptical. Consequently, these stories have never been as popular as his earlier work. But modern critics, in reevaluating Kipling, have found a greater power and depth that make them his best work.

In 1907, Kipling became the first English writer to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died on January 18, 1936, and is buried in Westminster Abbey. His autobiography, *Something of Myself*, was published posthumously in 1937.

### Works in Literary Context

Primarily influenced by his life experiences in India and England, Kipling also wrote about what he observed about conflicts such as the Boer War and the Spanish-American War. His experiences as a newspaperman greatly affected his style and interests. Spending many years in the British colony of India, Kipling experienced and expressed firsthand knowledge of the Indian people, Anglo-Indian culture, and the effects of colonial rule. His belief in the superiority of white people and colonial overlords is generally not embraced by early twenty-first century readers, but is reflective of attitudes of the time.

**Modernism** The years 1890–1932, during which Kipling's books were published in London and New York, coincided with the development of modernism and its establishment as the dominant literary style of the twentieth century. Modernism was a movement in twentieth-century literature that represented a self-conscious break with traditional forms and subject matter while searching for a distinctly contemporary mode of expression. Kipling's immense body of writing—five novels, approximately 250 short stories, more than eight hundred pages of verse, and a number of books of nonfiction prose—seems to have little obvious relationship to

modernism. Yet his books were extremely popular; 15 million volumes of his collected stories alone were sold.

Kipling's work, particularly his poetry, has received far less scholarly and critical attention than the efforts of major modernist writers, and he has not had as great an influence as such writers as William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or Wallace Stevens on generations of successive writers. Both Kipling's inability to inspire the most intense kinds of critical interest and literary imitation seem due equally to his literary style and his subject matter.

Nevertheless, such a characterization of Kipling's poetry, although justified and clearly recognized by most of its admirers, is superficial. In his verse one can also find many of the great qualities of the best modernist poetry: plainness, conciseness, passionate utterance instead of worn-out poetic diction, conviction, sharp images, a revitalized sense of history, great artistic craft, and originality.

**Imperialist Poetry** Upon returning to England in 1896, Kipling became an “unofficial laureate” of the British Empire and its people. From a not-at-all high-minded viewpoint, he wrote in verse of imperialist triumphs and defeats, illusions of peace, realities of war (particularly the conflict with the Boers of South Africa), local yet ancient history, and finally of World War I and its legacy.

Also contrary to most twentieth-century taste—which has been primarily formed by modernism—are Kipling's characteristically rhyming, rhythmically regular, formal stanzas. He was also intent on writing clear, matter-of-fact statements expressed by a voice certain about a particular point of view: again, rather the antithesis of a modernist persona.

**Use of Rhythm** One of the key elements of Kipling's poetry is its sound. He wrote many of his poems to be read aloud. For Kipling, this criterion required consistent use of regular rhythm, rhymes of all kinds, formal stanzas, the ballad, and forms of popular song. By the same measure, Kipling would avoid using free verse, which he likened to “fishing with barbless hooks.” In his autobiography, Kipling remembers how, when writing his poems in India, “I made my own experiments in the weights, colours, perfumes, and attributes of words in relation to other words, either as read aloud so that they may hold the ear or, scattered over the page, draw the eye. There is no line of my verse or prose which has not been mouthed till the tongue has made all smooth, and memory, after many recitals, has mechanically skipped the grosser superfluities.”

## Works in Critical Context

From the 1890s to the 1920s, the most popular writer in the English-speaking world was Rudyard Kipling. He won at the outset of his career the favorable attention of writers and critics, and in 1907, he received the first Nobel Prize for Literature given to an author writing in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Kipling wrote during a time when the powers of Europe were establishing vast colonial possessions in Africa and Asia, and he often wrote about colonialism. Other writers touched on this theme as well, especially once those colonies began moving toward independence in the twentieth century. Here are some books that deal with this topic:

*Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novel by Joseph Conrad. This tale of an ivory dealer in the Congo and his pursuit of the madman Kurtz paints a dark picture of European colonialism and would inspire the movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

*A Passage to India* (1924), a novel by E. M. Forster. Like several of Kipling's works, this book deals with the British presence in India, albeit at a later date: the 1920s, when the Indian independence movement was heating up.

*Midnight's Children* (1981), a novel by Salman Rushdie. An Indian Muslim, Rushdie secured his literary reputation with this tale of postcolonial India. The main character, born at the moment of India's partition (midnight on August 15, 1947), serves as an embodiment of Indian history since independence.

*Orientalism* (1978), a nonfiction work by Edward Said. This book is a milestone in postcolonial studies, the discipline of examining the impact of European colonialism on those regions that suffered under it, and how they are moving into their own identities, as well as the lingering prejudices that persist both in the former colonies and in Europe and America.

the English language. He published hundreds of short stories and poems, four novels, and volumes of pamphlets, speeches, and journalistic pieces. Yet, of his vast body of work, only his novel *Kim* and his other writing for children have kept Kipling popular. His children's books have remained in print while his tales for adults of ethics, aesthetics, and empire have gone out of fashion—though they are receiving renewed attention in the wake of recent critical interest in imperialism.

**The Novels** Of Kipling's four novel-length works, only *Kim* was critically well-received. Critics attributed the poor plotting and weak characterization of his first novel, *The Light That Failed*, to his youth and inexperience. His second novel, *The Naulahka*, exhibits the same shortcomings. In his last two novels, *Captains Courageous* (1897) and *Kim*, these weaknesses were turned to Kipling's advantage, for both share an essentially plotless, wandering structure that contributed to their effect. While some critics contend that a lack of introspection

on the part of the protagonist of *Kim* forms the primary fault in a potentially great work, others hold that Kipling's penetrating scrutiny of his dual attachments, as well as his sympathetic depiction of the Indian people, place this novel among the masterpieces of English literature.

**Poetry** Ann Parry writes in *The Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* that the question of whether Kipling was truly a poet has been "perpetually debated." She quotes writer T. R. Henn's answer to this question: "When his technical mastery, variety and craftsmanship have all been recognized, it has to be said that 'Kipling, nearly, but never wholly achieved greatness... the ultimate depth was lacking.'" An increasing number of readers since World War I have neither enjoyed nor felt instructed by poetry which often is, quite blatantly, politically imperialist and socially reactionary—sounding like and appealing to, in George Orwell's words, a "gutter patriot."

## Responses to Literature

1. Look at several of Kipling's poems of your choosing, and discuss the following in an essay: Do you agree that Kipling's work shows "technical mastery"? Why or why not? Do you agree with the assessment that Kipling's work lacks "ultimate depth"? Why or why not? Use examples to support your opinions.
2. The poem "If—" was originally published in Kipling's collection of children's stories, *Rewards and Fairies*, as a companion piece to the story "Brother Square-Toes," which features George Washington as a character. Read "Brother Square-Toes." Write a brief essay showing how "If—" serves to complement the short story.
3. In the late nineteenth century, Britain was a major empire, with colonies all over the world. Research the Boer War (1899–1902) using history textbooks or historical accounts in your library. In what ways did that war affect the British Empire? Create a presentation with your findings.
4. The characters of Nag and Nagaina are portrayed as villains in the story "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi." The use of snakes as a symbol of evil is common in Western civilization. Can you think of other stories, myths, or folktales that use this motif? Research the folktales and mythologies of another, non-Western culture, such as the Chinese culture or the Hindu culture. Are snakes used as symbols in these cultures and, if so, what do they represent? Write a paper that outlines your conclusions.
5. Much of *Kim* is set along the Grand Trunk Road, which was a main highway that crossed the Indian subcontinent. This highway has played a major role in the history of India. Research the history of the Grand Trunk Road. Where did it come from? What importance has it played over the centuries? Create a

presentation for the class that displays your findings and conclusions.

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## A. M. Klein

BORN: 1909, Ratno, Ukraine

DIED: 1972, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Fiction, poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Hath Not a Jew...* (1940)

*Poems* (1944)

*The Hitleriad* (1944)

*The Rocking Chair, and Other Poems* (1948)

*The Second Scroll* (1951)

## Overview

Regarded as one of Canada's foremost literary figures of the first half of the twentieth century, Klein is primarily known as a poet of the Jewish experience. While capturing the unique flavor of Jewish life in Montreal, Klein's poetry also illuminates the catastrophic history of the Jews. In addition to poetry celebrating his heritage, exemplified by the collection *Hath Not a Jew...* (1940), Klein addressed the various fundamental questions related to human existence in his collection *The Rocking Chair, and Other Poems* (1948). He also depicted humankind's universal quest for freedom in his acclaimed novel *The Second Scroll* (1951).

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Jewish Life and Commitment** Abraham Moses Klein was born in Ratno, Ukraine, on February 14, 1909, to Colman and Yetta Morantz Klein. The family immigrated soon thereafter to Canada. Klein was



A. M. Klein Library and Archives Canada. Reproduced by permission.

brought up in Montreal and lived his life there. His formative years were spent in the self-contained Jewish community of the Montreal ghetto, centered around St. Lawrence Boulevard. The first Jews came to Montreal in the 1760s, and the Jewish community in Montreal was founded shortly thereafter. It is one of the oldest Jewish communities in North America. By the early 1900s, at least seven thousand Jews lived in the city, with the population expanding due to immigrants from eastern and central Europe.

On completing his elementary Jewish education at the Talmud Torah, Klein studied for several years with private tutors, and as an adolescent his commitment to Judaism was so strong that he considered going to a yeshiva for rabbinic training. Instead, he embarked upon a secular career. After graduating from Baron Byng High School, he entered McGill University in the fall of 1926.

**Jewish Leader at University** While at McGill, Klein was a leading figure in Canadian Young Judaea, the Zionist youth movement. (Zionists supported a homeland for the Jewish people in Israel. The movement achieved its goal in 1948 with the founding of modern Israel.) In 1928, he became editor of its national periodical, the *Judaean*, and a year later he was appointed educational director of Young Judaea, a position he held until June 1932. From the early 1930s on he contributed articles and reviews to the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, and he prepared outlines for study groups in Young Judaea on

such topics as the history of the Jews in Poland and the treatment of the Jew in English literature.

**Jewish Fiction and Nonfiction** Many of Klein's early published poems and nearly all his early short stories appeared first in the *Judaean*. Klein's fiction, like his poetry, was an important part of his activity during his university years in the late 1920s and early 1930s. From 1929 to 1933, he published fourteen short stories, nearly all in Jewish publications. He contributed articles to the *McGill Daily*, and he founded a university literary magazine, the *McGilliad*.

**Continued Jewish Activities** Klein graduated with his BA in 1930 and proceeded to take his law degree at the University of Montreal in 1933. Upon graduating from law school, he practiced law with Samuel Chait, a friend from his Young Judaea days, but a year later, he entered partnership with Max Garmaise, a former fellow student at law school with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship. Klein was bored, however, and found the efforts to practice law in Montreal during the Depression years futile. The Great Depression had been caused by the Stock Market Crash of 1929 in the United States as well as economic crises worldwide in the late 1920s and early 1930s. During much of the 1930s, much of the world was mired in a financial slump.

Klein's short story "Whom God Hath Joined," written during this period, reflects his frustrations. After his father's death in 1934, Klein took on the financial burden of his family and added to his responsibility when he married his childhood sweetheart, Bessie Kozlov, in 1935.

In November 1938, Klein assumed the editorship of the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, the leading Anglo-Jewish weekly in Canada. For the next seventeen years, his was an important voice in the Jewish community as a lecturer on Zionism, in his poetry and fiction, and in hundreds of articles and editorials, published chiefly in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*.

**A Shift in Focus** Klein initially wrote to educate and empower the Jewish community, but the mid-1930s saw a shift in emphasis in his short stories. His widening range of activities, both in literary circles and in the legal profession, brought him in touch with a larger world of experience, one reflected in unpublished stories such as "Whom God Hath Joined" and "Portrait of an Executioner." The Great Depression, the problem of increasing financial responsibility after the death of his father, the growing threat of fascism, and the intensifying Nazi menace became greater subjects of concern for Klein.

The Nazi Party had gained power in Germany in the early 1930s. Led by Adolf Hitler, who soon became Germany's dictator, Nazi Germany had territorial ambitions backed by an expanded military. The Nazis gave

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Klein's famous contemporaries include:

**Golda Meir** (1898–1978): One of the founders of the modern state of Israel and its fourth prime minister.

**Henry Roth** (1906–1995): Author of *Call It Sleep* (1934), considered a masterpiece of Jewish American literature. The novel focuses on the life of a young boy growing up in a Jewish slum in New York City.

**Leon Uris** (1924–2003): American author famous for his well-researched historical novels, including *Exodus* (1958), which focuses on the founding of the modern state of Israel.

**Elia Kazan** (1909–2003): The Greek-American film and stage director also widely known for his cofounding of the New York City Actors Studio.

**Eudora Welty** (1909–2001): An American fiction writer who was widely known for her writings about the American South. Her novels include *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972), which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973.

Germans a sense of pride after their bitter defeat in World War I and the humiliating peace terms that deeply dampened the German economy. While Hitler and the Nazis longed to control Europe—a primary cause of the beginning of World War II in 1939—they also began taking away the civil rights of Jews as early as 1935. Part of their agenda became the extermination of Jews in what came to be known as the Holocaust.

**Dark Subjects** In 1932, Klein assembled most of his completed poems into two collections, *Gestures Hebraic* and *Poems*, neither of which has been published. The former contains his “Jewish” poems, and the latter, with some notable exceptions, such as “The Diary of Abraham Segal, Poet” and “The Soirée of Velvel Kleinburger,” includes poems not specifically Jewish in content. Most of Klein’s best-known early poems, such as “Greeting on This Day” and “Out of the Pulver and the Polished Lens,” and his first published volume of poetry, *Hath Not a Jew...* (1940), present poetry exclusively from the world of Jewish experience.

In the mid-1940s, after a lapse of a few years, Klein returned to the short-story genre and continued on his most familiar subjects. His dark view of the world, however, provoked by the Depression and Nazism, was worsened by the horror of the Holocaust and his perception of the cynical and immoral indifference of the democratic world. In three stories written between 1943 and 1945, “Detective Story,” “We Who Are About to Be Born,” and “One More Utopia,” Klein expresses a very negative attitude toward life.

**Postwar Concerns** Toward the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s, Klein’s stories reflected more of the contemporary political concerns, including growing tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, which soon hardened into the Cold War. Also political, and revealing, Klein’s doubts about man’s ability to govern rationally and perhaps even to survive are featured in two of his best short stories: “Letter from Afar” and “The Bells of Sobor Spasitula.”

**Depression and Collapse** Until he suffered a nervous breakdown in the mid-1950s, Klein continued as editor of the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*. He lectured frequently to Jewish audiences in Canada and the United States on the Holocaust and on the newly emergent state of Israel, and occasionally addressed groups on English writers, specifically James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. His breakdown, when it occurred, came as a shock.

After a short period spent in a hospital in late summer 1954, he attempted to return to his normal routine, but by the end of 1956, Klein withdrew from most of his activities and from virtually all contact with friends and family. His deep depression lasted until his death on August 20, 1972.

## Works in Literary Context

**Influences** Klein’s creative work was shaped by his Jewish background, home and education, among other influences. Klein’s early verse was also markedly influenced by the sensuous language and imagery of the poetry of Keats. While this influence remained because it was well suited to Klein’s temperament and taste, Klein also responded to the metaphysical qualities of John Donne and to the more modern verse of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. With Klein’s early stories he followed the tradition of the great Jewish short-story writers, such as I. L. Peretz, Chaim Nachman Bialik, Sholom Aleichem, and S. J. Agnon.

**Jewish Concerns as Themes** Much of Klein’s early creative writing reflects his interests and involvement in activities of Jewish and Zionist concern. Because Klein grew up in a religious home where Judaism was daily expressed, much of his work is reflective of the Jewish experience. His awareness of his place in a continuing tradition enabled him to achieve even in his most personal poems a transcendence of self and an enlargement of the meaning and significance of his experience. This awareness is made clear in such poems as “Psalm XXXVI—a Psalm Touching Genealogy,” in *Poems* (1944), and is demonstrated more thoroughly in *Hath Not a Jew...*

The central theme in *Hath Not a Jew...*, however, is anti-Semitism, a topic given terrible immediacy in the 1930s by the Nazis. Klein gives this subject perspective in “Sonnet in Time of Affliction” and “Design for Mediæval Tapestry,” for instance, by referring directly or

through image and allusion to instances of anti-Semitism in biblical and postbiblical times and in various regions. In "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," he depicts the callous indifference of the Western world to the brutal, genocidal policies of the pro-Nazi regimes, while in many other poems he examines the wide range of Jewish responses to this recurring tragedy, from pious or passive acquiescence to active resistance.

In all that he describes, whether through symbol, allusion, or precise and minute detail, Klein is essentially romantic, revealing the capacity to perceive freshly the wonder of life with a hint of whimsy. The subject matter of Klein's fiction, like that of many of his poems, centers on Jewish holidays and ceremonies, such as the Sabbath, Hanukkah, and Passover, and involves animals and demons, mystical visitants, and a wide range of characters familiar to the Jewish scene—the scribe or scholar, the *shlimazl*, or community functionary. The tone of these stories is comparable to that of the early poems—a blending of wit and whimsy, of sentimentality and wry humor, a respect for simple human dignity, and an acceptance of the weaknesses that seem, perhaps fortunately, an inevitable component in the human comedy.

### Works in Critical Context

Klein had always been esteemed by those writers and critics whose opinions he respected—writers E. J. Pratt, A. J. M. Smith, F. R. Scott, Irving Layton, and Louis Dudek, and critics W. E. Collin, Leon Edel, E. K. Brown, Northrop Frye, and Desmond Pacey, among others. Smith, for example, praised early poems like "Snowshoers" and said of Klein's later French-Canadian poems that "in the patriarchal, traditional and ecclesiastic entity that is French Canada, Klein found a universe that his Jewish sensibility permitted him to understand and love."

Yet Klein felt neglected by the general reading public and by the Jewish community. In some instances his perception may have been accurate. With his satire on Hitler, *Hitleriad*, for example, there was a certain amount of critical disapproval and his audience was limited. In other instances, however, Klein underestimated his work and audience. This is demonstrated with such works as *Hath Not a Jew....*

***Hath Not a Jew...*** The poems found in this collection explore history, past and current, and present dramatic incidents in the Holy Land and of the Diaspora (the Jewish community outside of Palestine) such as the massacre at Hebron and the pogroms in Europe. Some movingly describe famed characters such as Reb Levi Yitschok, philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the Baal Shem Tov. Critics note that his irony at times suggests a critical awareness of shortcomings, but on the whole the tone is genial and tolerant. In general, critics believe, Klein creates for his people a dignified counterportrait to the degrading stereotyped image circulated by anti-Semites.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Klein focused much literary attention on the horrors of the Holocaust. Other Holocaust-related works include:

*Collected Later Poems* (2003), poems by Anthony Hecht. In this collection of three volumes of poetry, the expressions of Hecht's experiences as a World War II liberator who witnessed the atrocities firsthand take on intense focus and profound sentiment.

*Night* (1955), a memoir by Elie Wiesel. In this brief but powerful autobiography, the author recounts his experiences as a young Orthodox Jew imprisoned at Auschwitz and Buchenwald.

*The Shawl* (1990), a collection of short fiction by Cynthia Ozick. In these the novella and short story contained in this publication, the author tells the intimate story of Holocaust survivor Rosa Lublin, who loses her children and her soul.

*Man's Search for Meaning* (1945), a nonfiction book by Viktor Frankl. In this work, the Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist retells his experiences as a Holocaust victim and puts forth a philosophy and a therapy of existential healing.

Critics believe that Klein's poetic craftsmanship is clearly evidenced in this volume, in which he used almost every poetic form and device, often quite experimentally, with success. The book may have confirmed Klein's frustrations—as it sold poorly at the time—but many of the poems of *Hath Not a Jew...* have since become common selections in anthologies of Canadian literature. Along similar lines, critic Leon Edol wrote in *Poetry* of the book, "The collection does Klein a distinct disservice in that it is not sufficiently representative of his remarkable gifts, the gift above all of eloquent rebellion." Edol concludes, however, that "despite their flaws, these poems are a key to an ancient, deep-rooted, emotional and intellectual tradition. As such, they can lay claim to vitality and importance."

### Responses to Literature

1. The pattern of life in Klein's community was uniquely Jewish. Festive and solemn religious holidays were key annual events, and the code of religious observances was the norm of accepted behavior. In a group, take responsibility for investigating one Jewish holiday, discovering its origin, its importance today, and how it is celebrated. Prepare a presentation to the class demonstrating what you learn.

2. Klein presents to his reader a broad cross section of French Canadians, ranging from ordinary folk with simple faith and large families to industrial and financial barons, from rowdy students and sedate scholars to gangsters and demagogic politicians, and from pompous functionaries to humbly devout and devoted Sisters of Mercy. Consider the characteristics of one of these persons. Make a list of the qualities in that character that you find striking. Then write a portrait poem to depict that person/character.
3. Klein planned a major historical novel on the golem legend, a topic that fascinated him. Research the golem legend. Find out what a golem is, what the background is for the legend, and what different versions of the folklore exist. Then read Michael Chabon's 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, which makes prominent use of a golem. How might Klein's use of the legend have differed from Chabon's?
4. Students interested in finding out more about the Jewish community in Canada should read *A Coat of Many Colors: Two Centuries of Jewish Life in Canada* (1990) by Irving Abella. The book contains hundreds of photographs and traces the impact of Jewish immigration to Canada starting in 1738.

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## Heinrich von Kleist

BORN: 1777, Frankfurt an der Oder, Prussia

DIED: 1811, Wannsee bei Potsdam, Prussia

NATIONALITY: German

GENRE: Drama, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Feud of the Schroffensteins* (1803)

*The Broken Jug* (1803–1805)

*Penthesilea* (1808)

*Herman's Battle* (1809)

*Prince Friedrich von Homburg* (1811)

### Overview

Unappreciated in his own time, Heinrich von Kleist is now considered one of the greatest German dramatists, and his work is favorably compared with that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller. Kleist's short life is almost as much a puzzle as his works: His



Heinrich von Kleist Kleist, Heinrich Von, photograph. The Library of Congress.

death came just a month after his thirty-fourth birthday, and he never married.

### **Works in Biographical and Historical Context**

**A Military Background and a Military Life**  
Heinrich von Kleist was born in Frankfurt an der Oder on October 18, 1777, to a military family that had provided Prussia with eighteen generals. Kleist was educated privately until the age of eleven, when he went to the French Gymnasium in Berlin. Kleist joined the army at the age of fifteen and participated in the 1793 Rhine campaign against the French, but, to the disappointment of his family, he left the army in 1799 with no definite plans.

**A Planned Marriage and Mysterious Travels**  
Kleist attended the university in his native city for one year, while also working as a tutor to Wilhelmine von Zenge, the daughter of a family friend. Kleist and Zenge fell in love, and their subsequent betrothal necessitated that he secure a financially stable position. He found employment in the civil service but soon left on a long journey through Europe, the true purpose of which has never been discovered. In his letters to Zenge, he refers vaguely to a medical condition for which he is seeking treatment and to a secret mission investigating industries outside Prussia. Scholars note the importance of this trip in Kleist's development; it was in his letters to Zenge that he first expressed his desire to pursue a literary career.

Another key event in Kleist's intellectual development was his reading in 1801 of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788). Kleist's reading of Kant challenged his rational ideas about human perfectibility and immortality. Kant maintained that reason was not able to discern the truth behind appearances; this sent Kleist into a period of despair that scholars commonly call his "Kant crisis." Scholars and critics also suggest that Kleist's reaction to Kant set the tone for his creative work to come—in which he despaired over the impossibility of anything being absolutely certain.

**A Reluctant Civil Servant Turns to Literature**  
Financial constraints eventually required Kleist to return to the civil service, but in 1801 he again gave up his position and moved to Paris with his half-sister Ulrike. Life in France did not please Kleist. Reading the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he became determined to lead a simple, natural life: Later that year he retreated to Switzerland and asked Zenge to join him there in an idyllic retreat. She refused but explained in a letter that she understood his need to satisfy his literary ambitions before returning to Germany. Kleist did return to Prussia in 1804 to assume another minor civil service post in Potsdam, but his betrothal to Zenge never proceeded to marriage.

### **LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES**

Kleist's famous contemporaries include:

**Jane Austen** (1775–1817): A British novelist famous for her works *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, widely considered classics of English literature.

**Simón Bolívar** (1783–1830): A Venezuela-born resistance leader who was instrumental in Hispanic America's liberation from Spain and in founding the Spanish colonies of Gran Columbia.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772–1834): A British poet, philosopher, and critic who is widely known as one of the founders of the Romantic movement.

**Francis Scott Key** (1779–1843): The American lawyer and author who wrote the United States' national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749–1832): A German Romantic poet, playwright, and novelist, most famous for his drama *Faust*.

Kleist wrote all of his major works between 1804 and 1810, during which time he was sometimes a civil servant and sometimes not. He also, with the German economist Adam Müller, started the literary journal *Phöbus* as a vehicle for his stories. Lack of financial support caused the journal's early demise; this disappointment was compounded by the failure of Goethe's 1808 production of Kleist's play *The Broken Jug*. In 1810 the first volume of Kleist's *Erzählungen*, a collection of stories and novellas, was published. At this time he also started a political periodical, *Die Berliner Abendblätter*, in which he published anti-Napoleonic articles, but lack of popular support resulted in the closure of the paper after six months. In 1799, Napoléon Bonaparte had led a coup d'état that effectively ended the French Revolution that had been in effect since 1789, and in 1804 he installed himself as emperor of France and began military campaigns designed to bring all of Europe under his thrall. His victories over Prussia and other German states were greeted by some with equanimity, since he was seen as a tonic against the revolutionary forces stewing all across Europe, but were intensely galling for nationalists like Kleist.

**A Sensational Suicide** Throughout his life, Kleist had expressed a wish to die and had frequently asked friends to commit suicide with him. In 1811 he befriended Henriette Vogel, a well-known actress who was dying of cancer; she agreed to a suicide pact. The two traveled together to an inn near Potsdam, and on November 21, Kleist shot Vogel and then himself. The double suicide was reported throughout Europe and

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Because of the scandal and controversy surrounding his death, Kleist has come to represent the idea of the “tragic artist” driven to extremity by the constraints of society. Here are some other works either by or about “tragic artists”:

*Lust for Life* (1934), a novel by Irving Stone. This biography of Dutch artist Vincent Van Gogh was the first of many successful biographies written by stone. Van Gogh suffered bouts of mental illness.

*A Season in Hell* (1873), a poem by Arthur Rimbaud. This extended poem was enormously influential on later European writers. Rimbaud himself led a troubled and troubling life full of excesses of all kinds, and details of his personal life have given his work added mystique.

*Waiting on God* (1950), a collection of essays, letters, and other writings by Simone Weil. Weil was a French social activist and mystic whose devotion to her causes was deemed by those around her to be extreme at the very least, and possibly insane. She starved herself to death in 1943 out of sympathy for those suffering under the German occupation of France during World War II.

attracted much attention and debate, thereby helping to keep Kleist’s memory alive and ultimately—albeit rather morbidly—stimulating critical interest in his works.

### Works in Literary Context

**Philosophical and Literary Precedents** Kleist’s life and work were influenced by his study of the works of Rousseau and by his close reading of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788). Kleist also took cues from literature; for example, *The Feud of the Schroffensteins* (1916) borrows from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* with its story of family hostility standing in the way of young love. Likewise, his play *Penthesilea* (1808) was inspired by a Greek myth about an Amazon queen.

Kleist’s dramas are written in blank verse rather than the smooth, classical verse used by Schiller and Goethe, the authors with whom he has been most often compared. Kleist’s style is characterized by frequent enjambments, caesuras, and abrupt changes of speaker; for instance, although only the first ten scenes of *Robert Guiskard* have survived, the existing fragment suffices to demonstrate how powerful a drama it might have become had Kleist been able to finish it. A play about the Norman leader’s plan to conquer Constantinople, *Robert Guiskard* reveals how Kleist used dramatic gesture, the similes of Homer, exaggerated metaphor, and disrupted word order and unfinished utterance to indi-

cate the emotional conflicts and secret thoughts and feelings of the characters.

### Human Frailty and the Existential Vision

Scholars note that Kleist’s work is informed with an existential vision—one that emphasizes human frailty. *Robert Guiskard*, for example, examines the plight of a dying army commander, an ambitious man who ultimately comes to despair over his inability to realize his goals. Kleist’s plays and stories often depict uncontrolled erotic passion, mental confusion, and violent emotional outbursts that in his time offended common notions of propriety and good taste. This concern with uncontrolled passion and violence is evident in his first play, *The Feud of the Schroffensteins* (1803; published 1916), for instance, a tragedy incorporating a plot similar to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, except that the feuding fathers kill their own children to prevent their love affair.

### Works in Critical Context

One of the most enigmatic of German writers, Heinrich von Kleist has been the object of critical debate and controversy from his appearance on the literary scene in the first decade of the nineteenth century to the present day. That his creative genius was of an exceptionally high order has not been disputed. It was rather the extreme stylization and frank sexuality of his depictions that shocked his contemporaries, denying him the public and critical acclaim he craved and believed he deserved. In his plays and stories, raging passions result in shattered skulls and suitors slain and devoured in the name of love; however, these tendencies have ensured continuing interest in his work during the twentieth century, and he is now read with a keen eye to his acute psychological insight and honest depiction of sexuality. Equally, readers over the years have been all but obsessed with assigning meaning to Kleist’s death by suicide.

Nineteenth-century critics searched Kleist’s works for evidence of mental illness, focusing on the extreme and eccentric nature of his characters. In the early twentieth century, scholars influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche focused on Kleist’s suicide as part of his literary makeup and read Kleist as an example of Nietzsche’s tragic artist. Others saw Kleist, in the words of Julius Petersen, as the “classic of Expressionism,” interpreting his works as a quest for philosophical certainty. German nationalist critics in the period of Adolf Hitler’s rule cited Kleist’s suicide as the ultimate sacrifice of an individual for his country and praised his works, especially *Prince Friedrich von Homburg* and *Herman’s Battle*, for their glorification of individual commitment to the German nation.

**Twentieth-Century Approaches to Kleist’s Death and Works** Kleist criticism after World War II took an existential turn, with readers seeing Kleist’s suicide as the normal response to the tragic nature of human existence. For example, Swana L. Hardy, who interprets

Kleist's work as the "allegory" of his life, suggests in her essay "Heinrich von Kleist: Portrait of a Mannerist" that one can "perceive in Kleist and his work a paradigm [a model] of the existentialist interpretation of man." Since the 1960s there has also been increasing emphasis on studying the social, political, and historical aspects of Kleist's works. Many Marxist scholars believe that Kleist's primary concern was the relation of man to society under capitalism—though they debate as to whether Kleist condoned middle-class values or supported a rebellion against authority.

More recent responses to Kleist have focused on his short stories, as collected in the *Erzählungen*, with an eye to understanding these stories' relationship to other writers and thinkers. Anthony Stephens, for instance, suggests that Kleist's "practice as a literary writer is invariably to quote, with varying degrees of scepticism or irony, convictions he had once uncritically espoused." Coming from another angle, Séan Allan observes with some satisfaction that "literary critics are no longer predisposed to see the works as ending on a note of reconciliation but rather as riddled with elements of ambiguity and irony to the extent that they negate any prospect of establishing a habitable order in which human progress might be possible."

## Responses to Literature

1. In his analysis of Kleist's short fiction, Denys Dyer suggests that the chaos depicted in the stories mirrors the upheaval in Europe caused by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. To consider Kleist's writing in this context, research an event related to the period of Napoleonic rule and find evidence of the event as it informs one of Kleist's works, such as *Herman's Battle* (1809) or *Prince Friedrich von Homburg* (1821). Analyze examples from the work that show Kleist's attitude toward Napoléon.
2. Many Marxist scholars believe that Kleist's primary concern was the relation of man to society under capitalism. In a group effort, find evidence that would support this critical interpretation and evidence that would argue against it. Hold a debate where both sides are expressed. In a Kleist work, for example, where does the author show he condones middle-class values? In contrast, where does he seem to favor a rebellion against authority? Offer a detailed analysis of examples to defend a pro or con position.
3. In an introduction to Kleist's short story "On the Marionette Theatre" Idris Parry writes, "On the centenary of his death, the critics agreed he was a hundred years ahead of his time. In 1977 they said he'd come into the world (on 18 October 1777) two hundred years too early." Read a Kleist story and consider what would appeal to readers today. Do you agree that Kleist was ahead of his time? Why or why not?

4. As a proto-existentialist thinker and writer, Kleist often showed opposition to theories of human perfection. Consider what it means to be perfect: make a list of human goals that strive toward perfection (in sports, in academics, in the workplace, in relationships). What characteristics in our lives make us, however, less than perfect? How does Kleist show human fallibility? How does this play out in the lives of his characters? What does Kleist's own attitude toward the fragile human condition seem to be?

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## Ivan Klíma

BORN: 1931, Prague, Czechoslovakia

NATIONALITY: Czech

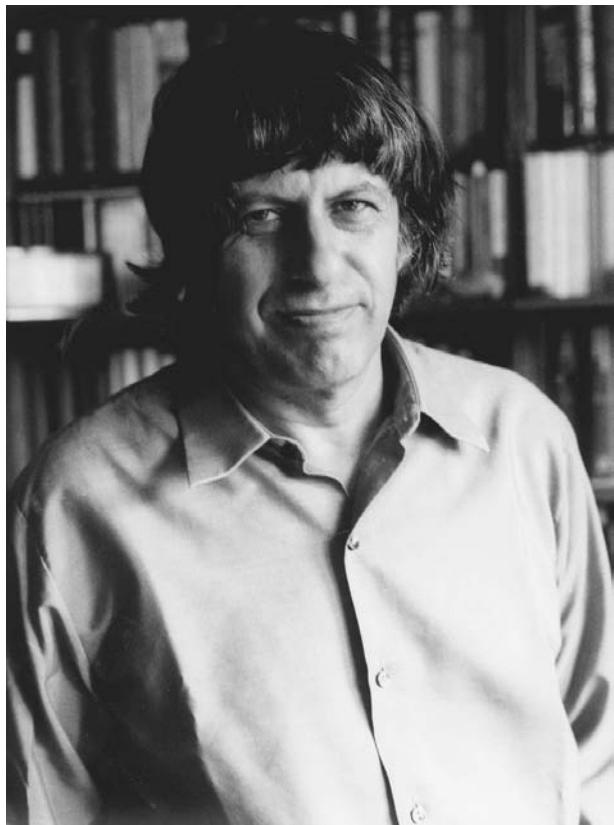
GENRE: Drama, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Within Three Frontiers* (1960)

*My First Loves* (1988)

*Love and Garbage* (1990)



Ivan Klíma *Klíma, Ivan, photograph.* © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

## Overview

Ivan Klíma belongs to the generation of Czech writers who lived through two totalitarian regimes—Nazism and communism. Outspoken in his criticism of the communist regime, Klíma was expelled from the Communist Party, and his works were banned from publication, following the suppression in 1968 of the Prague Spring reform movement. As a result, many of his works first appeared in German translation or by Czech-language publishing houses abroad.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood in a Concentration Camp** Klíma was born in Prague on September 14, 1931, to Ing Vilém Klíma, an electronics engineer, and Marta Klíma, née Synková. Since he was part Jewish, he was sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Bohemia in December of 1941 and spent three and a half years there. Millions of Jewish people died from starvation, disease, abuse, and systematic execution while being held captive in such camps. Few prisoners survived and many were sent to extermination camps, like Auschwitz. Klíma was one of only 17,247 (of approximately 144,000

imprisoned Jews) survivors of the Theresienstadt camp. After World War II Klíma went to secondary school in Prague and then studied Czech language and literature at Charles University. He submitted his thesis on Karel Čapek in 1956; it was revised and published in book form in 1962. Klíma worked as an editor from 1956 to 1963. On September 24, 1958, he married Helena Malá, a sociologist, with whom he had two children.

**A Change of Heart** As a young man, Klíma, like many of his contemporaries, believed that communism was the fairest political and economic system, but his father's arrest and other experiences after the communists came to power in February of 1948 led him to abandon the ideology. His literary debut in the young writers' journal *May* and his first books, the story collections *A Perfect Day* and *Within Three Frontiers*, bear witness to this change of heart. Instead of the oversimplified, idealized picture of the world current in Czech literature in the 1950s, in these works the characters are not merely representatives of an ideology or a social group but individuals with vivid inner lives.

**A Platform for Political and Cultural Reform** Klíma worked as deputy editor of the weekly *Literary Newspaper* from 1963 until it was suppressed in 1967; he continued in the same position with its successors, the *Literary Gazette* from March to August of 1968 and the *Gazette* from autumn of 1968 until spring of 1969. Far from being purely literary journals, these cultural and political papers were in the forefront of the efforts of Czech writers, artists, and intellectuals to liberalize the communist regime; they were also quite popular—their circulation never fell below a hundred thousand in a nation of ten million. Thus, they were the chief platform for the political and cultural reform movement that led to the Prague Spring.

**Banned in Czechoslovakia** In 1969–1970 Klíma was a guest lecturer at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. When he returned to Czechoslovakia, he found himself one of some four hundred writers who were banned from publishing their works and appearing in the media. His earlier works had been removed from the libraries, and his new books were distributed illegally in samizdat (secretly published) editions; they were also published abroad by Czech exiles and in translations, mainly in German. This situation lasted until the fall of communism at the end of 1989, although in the final months of the communist regime, negotiations were under way to allow Klíma's *My Merry Mornings*, which had appeared in samizdat in 1978 and had been published in Canada in 1979, to be published officially in Czechoslovakia. During the 1970s and 1980s, Klíma held jobs as a hospital porter, postman, seasonal seller of carp (a Czech Christmas dish), and assistant surveyor.

**The Fall of Communism** Klíma's works could not be published by Czech publishing houses until after the

fall of communism in 1989, and only then was he again able to take part in public life and to travel abroad. In December of 1989 he became one of the founders of *Obec spisovatelů* (Association of Writers), and from 1990 to 1993 he was chairman of the Czech PEN club. He also began writing on current affairs for Prague newspapers, especially for the *Literary Newspaper*. Since 1991 he has been writing a regular column, "Letters from Prague," for *New York Newsday* and the Swedish *Svenska Dagbladet*. He also writes articles for the German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*.

### Works in Literary Context

The work of Klíma is heavily influenced by his experiences of abuse and oppression. Within the confines of the concentration camp where he spent a number of years, Klíma was exposed to the storytelling of Jewish women, including his mother, who were housed with their children. In his fiction and drama, Klíma documents everyday life in a totalitarian society. He is praised for his use of satire and black humor to examine the effects of political and economic repression upon ordinary individuals. Within this framework, it is easy to see the influence of existentialism—which emphasizes the absolute necessity of experiencing life in light of the fact that there is no guarantee of an afterlife—and particularly absurdist drama and fiction on Klíma's work. But since Klíma was himself a person living in a totalitarian state, he also relies on his own life experiences to inform his fiction and drama. In this way, the absurdist images and situations in Klíma's work become metaphors for the actual condition of life Klíma himself experienced in Czechoslovakia during the Nazi regime and, later, the communist regime.

**Existentialism** Existentialist and satirical motifs appear in much of Klíma's fiction. In the trio of stories collected as *Lovers for a Single Night*, he criticizes modern life as stereotyped and routine. The stories are primarily monologues by young people who are trying to escape the monotony of their lives by searching for an intense emotional bond to a partner of the opposite sex. Klíma added to his critique of life in contemporary society in *Lovers for a Day*. In these texts, for the first time in Czech literature, eroticism and sex emerge as the individual's way of achieving self-realization, counterbalancing a rigidly conventional and outwardly circumscribed life. The story "Klara and the Two Gentlemen" in *Lovers for a Day* is strongly influenced by absurdist drama: It includes circular, almost meaningless dialogues and horrifying props and effects such as cages and barbed wire in a wardrobe and a telephone that rings at night but is silent when answered—a terrifying occurrence in a police state. The drama *The Castle* aroused interest as an indirect reference to the castle at Dobříš, where the state-sponsored Czech writers lived in luxury, and as a parable of relentless power, especially during the Stalinist years.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Klíma's famous contemporaries include:

- Philip Roth** (1933–): American author who received the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *American Pastoral*.
- Chinua Achebe** (1930–): Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic, best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*.
- J. M. Coetzee** (1940–): South African novelist whose works often address the serious problems facing South Africa in the postapartheid era.
- Milan Kundera** (1929–): Exiled Czech-born novelist most famous for his book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.
- Neil Armstrong** (1930–): American astronaut and the first man to walk on the moon.
- Nelson Mandela** (1918–): This former president of South Africa was the first to be elected in a completely democratic election.

**Autobiographical Elements** *Love and Garbage* is set in Prague at the beginning of the 1970s, but the reminiscences of the hero take the reader back to the German occupation during World War II and to the Stalinist 1950s. Judge Adam Kindl is faced with the dilemma of whether to join the powers that be or to adhere to his moral principles. There are clearly autobiographical elements in the character, including his confinement in a concentration camp, his joining the Communist Party, his disillusionment with communism, and his work in the reform movement of 1968. In the end, Kindl decides not to cooperate with the political establishment, refusing to send an innocent man to the gallows as demanded by his superior, and gives up his post. In so doing, in spite of his subsequent difficulty in earning a living, he becomes a free man. *Love and Garbage*, like novels by such authors as Alexander Kliment, Ludvík Vaculík, and Karel Pecka, describes the lot of Czech intellectuals who refused to submit during the neo-Stalinism of the 1970s and 1980s.

Although he remains less known than some of his contemporaries, like Milan Kundera, Klíma's writings continue to influence readers by reminding them of the horrors that exist within totalitarian regimes.

### Works in Critical Context

When discussing the works of Klíma, one must always remember that he spent a good portion of his career working in a country that banned his writing. Indeed, some critics have focused their analytical powers on defining in what ways and to what extent this ban affected the work of Klíma. Other critics focus on the author's

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Artists in totalitarian regimes often try to express the human face of the suffering endured by the restrictive practices and laws of the government under which they live. Here are a few works that deal with the emotional and intellectual response to these kinds of governments:

*1984* (1949), a novel by George Orwell. Written just after the end of World War II (consequently the end of Nazi rule in Europe), this novel envisions a world in which a dictatorship has taken so much control over the lives of its subjects that every citizen has lost all sense of privacy and freedom. The novel continues to serve as a warning against excessive, invasive governmental meddling in the lives of its citizenry.

*The Telling* (2000), a novel by Ursula K. Le Guin. In this science fiction tale, Le Guin examines the conflict between a totalitarian government and a religious sect that attempts to oppose it.

*Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), a memoir by Anne Frank. Perhaps the most recognizable account of living in fear under a totalitarian government, Frank wrote the contents of this memoir while in hiding from the Nazis.

*Jakob the Liar* (1999), a film directed by Peter Kassovitz. This movie depicts life in a ghetto in Poland during the Holocaust. The protagonist, in order to give hope to his neighbors, tells them that he has a radio and is receiving messages about the prospect that they will soon be saved.

combination of autobiography and fiction in his work. Overwhelmingly, though, most critics praise not only the daring evident in Klíma's life, as displayed in his willingness to continue to write despite governmental resistance, but also the power of the writing itself.

**The Samizdat Works** The critics Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* and reviewer Richard Eder of the *Los Angeles Times* have discussed the effects that government bans can have on writing style. Eder observed that "writing accomplished through censorship and the prospect of punishment can take on a primal urgency. There is a nerviness to it. It comes partly from the act of defiance, and partly from the hunger of readers to hear voices and messages denied them by the official monopoly." As an example, Eder pointed to Klíma's short-story collection *My Merry Mornings*, which he called "a work of jittery truth...gritty, passionate and starved."

The plot of Klíma's *A Summer Affair* involves a research scientist who, in the words of *Times Literary*

*Supplement's* Lesley Chamberlain, "shamelessly and unreasonably...abandons his family and his work for a humiliating and temperamental sexual arrangement." Summing up the author's treatment of his protagonist's behavior, Chamberlain states: "Though Ivan Klíma does not quite condone, these are facts, not matters inviting judgment. Love is a condition, not a controllable sin, and Klíma writes about it with disconcerting Flaubertian wisdom."

**My First Loves** *My First Loves*, a collection of four stories, was published in the United States in 1988. "At first glance," Eder remarks, "the tone is delicately nostalgic, even pastoral....The longings, delusions and losses of young love become a code language for an alien and crimped reality." According to Eder, the author is not always successful in this regard, and "the result is writing that is haunting at times, but that can be cloudy and bland." Jack Sullivan, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, comments that "Klíma is most compelling when he is willing to trust the power and odd lucidity of his hero's adolescent musing. He is least so when he occasionally...explains the work's symbolism and significance. No explanations are necessary, for these stories carry the burning authority and desperate eloquence of a survivor."

**Love and Garbage** Klíma's novel *Love and Garbage* focuses on a middle-aged dissident writer in Prague who had lived in the Theresienstadt camp as a child. Unable to make a living at his profession because his work is banned, he becomes a street sweeper. The tales of his fellow laborers become part of the material for his fiction, along with memories of people who were close to him and an account of his present struggle to choose between his wife and his mistress. The book turns on many allegories, most of which are centered around the question of what is trash. In the *London Times*, Barbara Day explains that "Klíma was writing before the 'gentle revolution' which swept away the tainted ideals of his country's old government, and brought in a new one. Now he is amongst those who are working—a little less gently—to clear up the rubbish of the past." In the opinion of Alberto Manguel in the *Washington Post Book World*, "*Love and Garbage* announces [the] world's essential dichotomy: We create in order to destroy, and then build from the destruction. Our emblem is the phoenix."

In the *New Republic*, Stanislaw Baranczak criticizes the author's style, noting that "Klíma does his thing with utmost seriousness, with heavy-handed directness; even his symbols seem to have a sign that reads ATTENTION: SYMBOL attached to them, lest we overlook their exfoliating, larger-than-life implications." Eva Hoffman, in the *New York Times*, finds that the author's "sincerity sometimes slides toward banality. The novel's fragmentary method makes for a certain stasis." She concludes, however, that these defects "do not substantially affect the

import or the impact of Mr. Klíma's work," which "affords the experience, rare in today's fiction, of being in the presence of a seasoned, measured perspective, and a mind that strives honestly to arrive at a wisdom sufficient to our common condition."

## Responses to Literature

1. Read *Love and Garbage*. Can you tell which elements of the book were taken directly from Klíma's life experiences? In your opinion, is it "cheating" when fiction writers use events and characters directly from their own lives? Why or why not? What difficulties might this cause for the writer?
2. Read *The Castle* and Frank's *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. How do these authors represent in their respective texts the totalitarian governments under which they lived? What aspects of the regime concern them? How do they convey this concern? Which text is more moving? Why? In your response, make sure to cite specific examples and passages from each text.
3. In *Love and Garbage*, a banned Czech writer must take a job as a street sweeper in order to make ends meet. In your opinion, which is the more important job—writing works that cannot be published or sweeping the streets? Why? Imagine an unemployed, unpublished writer living in New York and compare this to a sanitation worker in the same city; does your view on the subject change? Explain your opinion.
4. During the 1960s, many writers in Czechoslovakia were banned from publishing in their own country. Using the Internet and the library, research the government's rationale for banning these authors, paying special attention to Klíma's case. Then, in a short essay, describe the circumstances that led to the practice and express your opinion on the subject.

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## Joy Kogawa

BORN: 1935, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Poetry, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Splintered Moon* (1968)

*Obasan* (1981)

*Woman in the Woods* (1985)

*Itsuka* (1992)

*The Rain Ascends* (1995)

## Overview

Joy Kogawa is an award-winning author who became a member of the Order of Canada in 1986 and of the Order of British Columbia in 2006. She is recognized for her novels, poetry, essays, children's stories, and social activism; she is best known for *Obasan* (1981), a semi-autobiographical novel about the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Internment** Joy Nozomi Nakayama was born on June 6, 1935, in Vancouver to Gordon Goichi Nakayama, an Anglican clergyman, and Lois Masui Yao Nakayama, a kindergarten teacher. In 1942, the year following the attack on Pearl Harbor and Canada's declaration of war on Japan, some twenty-one thousand



Joy Kogawa Kogawa, Joy, photograph. AP Images.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kogawa's famous contemporaries include:

**Dame Julie Andrews** (1935–): English performer of several decades, she has won multiple awards for her work in popular musicals and is loved on both sides of the world.

**Václav Havel** (1936–): Czech writer and dramatist, he was the ninth and final president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic.

**Elgar Howarth** (1935–): English conductor and composer, this former trumpet player has contributed his talents the world over.

**Joe Orton** (1933–1967): English satirical playwright who wrote risqué black comedies that shocked and amused his audiences.

**John Updike** (1932–): Award-winning novelist, essayist, and literary critic who is often appreciated for his in-depth chronicling of American psychological, social, and political cultures.

residents of Japanese ancestry living within one hundred miles of the Pacific Coast were moved to labor and detention camps in the interior of British Columbia. Except for personal belongings, all of their property was confiscated. The Nakayama family was sent to Slocan and, like the protagonist of *Obasan* (1981), underwent their internment in the Canadian interior.

**Postwar Exile and Early Career** After the end of the war in 1945, Japanese Canadians were given the choice of returning to Japan or going into internal exile east of British Columbia. The Nakayamas, who identified themselves as Canadians, were relocated to Coaldale, Alberta.

In 1954, Joy completed a year of study at the University of Alberta and took a teaching post at an elementary school in Coaldale. In 1955, she enrolled at the Anglican Women's Training College and Conservatory of Music in Toronto; the following year she transferred to a music school in Vancouver. Joy married David Kogawa in 1957, and the couple lived in several places throughout Canada before divorcing in 1968.

In 1968, Kogawa published her first poetry collection, *The Splintered Moon*. The next year she traveled to Japan, remaining there for three months. Her second poetry collection, *A Choice of Dreams* (1974), resulted, in part, from that visit. This collection was to begin her use of silence as a means of finding and expressing issues of identity, which anticipated her works to follow. From 1974 to 1976, Kogawa worked as a staff writer in the office of the prime minister, and a year later her next

poetry collection, *Jericho Road*, appeared. In several poems in the book the notion of silence generating meaning reappears.

**Garnering Widespread Critical Acclaim** In 1978, the same year she was a writer in residence at the University of Ottawa, Kogawa published *Six Poems*. Kogawa moved to Toronto in 1979. In 1981, she published *Obasan*—the first novel in the history of Canadian fiction to deal with the internment of Japanese Canadians. Kogawa garnered widespread critical attention, receiving the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award, the Canadian Authors' Association Book of the Year Award, the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award, and the American Library Association Notable Book Award in 1982. *Obasan* also brought Kogawa international recognition.

In 1984, Kogawa visited Japan for the second time. The following year, she published *Woman in the Woods*, which introduced a more pronounced feminist voice than her previous poetry collections. In 1992, *Itsuka*, a sequel to *Obasan*, appeared. In 1995 Kogawa published *The Rain Ascends*, a fictional account of sexual abuse by an Anglican priest. In 1998, Knox received a request from Kristine Bogyo, a classical-music performer, to write a narrative on the Lilith myth for a multimedia performance that would include narrated text, artwork, and music. Kogawa's first impulse had been to decline: Community work was consuming most of her time, and she was not familiar with the Lilith material. But, she says in the author's preface to the published text of the work, when she received the artwork of Lilian Broca that was to be used in the project, she felt "deluged" with the "rich, powerful images." Broca also sent Kogawa an outline of her research on Lilith, and Kogawa was captivated by the beauty of the legend and the strong character of Lilith. The published version of the collaboration appeared in 2000 as *A Song of Lilith*.

**Kogawa Namesakes** In 2001, Kogawa received a lifetime achievement award from the Association of Asian American Studies and honorary doctorates from the University of British Columbia in 2001 and Queen's University and the University of Windsor in 2003. In 2006, Kogawa was made a member of the Order of British Columbia, and a campaign was launched to make Kogawa's childhood home a venue for the Writers in Residence program and a historic literary landmark for Vancouver and all of Canada.

### Works in Literary Context

**Spare, Minimalist Style** Kogawa writes much of her poetry in a bold style that is close to journalism. Characteristic of what is considered "minimalist," for example, is *The Splintered Moon* (1968). The twenty-one poems offer a glimpse into a world of emotional intensity and spiritual longing underscored by Kogawa's spare, stark, style.

Kogawa's experiences living in exile in Japanese internment camps with her family during World War II provide the inspiration for her writing and continue to influence the trajectory of her career as an author and advocate of human rights.

**Themes of Memory and Identity** Kogawa's minimalist world nonetheless presents a complex interweaving of the particular and universal, the private and social. In both her fiction and her poetry she addresses issues of racial and cultural diversity, persecution, and self-identity. What is central to most of her work is a theme of racial memory and history that helps address such issues. This is addressed for the first time in "We Had Not Seen It," the only prose poem in *The Splintered Moon*. Exploration of memory takes on a personal tone in her love lyric "In Memory," and the creation of reality and identity through words is the theme of "As Though It Were the Earth." *Six Poems* displays a continuity with previous collections through the exploration of the significance of collective memory.

*Six Poems* also continues the emphasis on the dual construction of silence and speech that runs through her work with the themes of memory and identity and symbolic stone imagery that all lend themselves to and anticipate the highly acclaimed *Obasan* (1981)—wherein memory is holistic and healing and the only truth that is given to the narrator. "There is a silence that cannot speak. There is a silence that will not speak....The word is stone." The opening words of the novel define the spiritual quest for the articulation of memory for an author and poet who has become a voice of the three generations of Japanese Canadians who suffered internment and persecution during World War II.

### Works in Critical Context

Critics have praised Kogawa's poetry for its concise, poetic language. As Edward M. White noted the poet has a "magical ability to convey suffering and privation, inhumanity and racial prejudice, without losing in any way joy in life and in the poetic imagination." Gary Willis observed that Kogawa's first three volumes of poetry are filled with "lyric verse" and poems that often "express feelings that emerge from a narrative context that is only partly defined."

Although Kogawa's poetry has received favorable reviews, most critics have focused on her novel, *Obasan*, which concerns the development of a third-generation Japanese Canadian named Naomi Nakane.

***Obasan* (1981)** The novel, which includes many autobiographical details, is narrated by Naomi Nakane, a thirty-six-year-old schoolteacher. In addition to winning a great number of awards, *Obasan* was highly acclaimed by critics. Speaking for the general reception of the novel of "expressive realism," Cynthia Wong bestowed praise on the author for making efforts to address those social injustices left out of "official" histor-

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One of the more important aspects of Kogawa's work is her concern with giving a hearing to marginalized voices and rethinking the processes of Canadian history, identity, truth, and memory. Here are a few works by writers who also made efforts to give voices to the marginalized by writing on similar themes:

*Things Fall Apart* (1959), a novel by Chinua Achebe.

Renowned as the most widely read piece of African literature, the work tells the story of colonialism and its invasive and destructive impact on Nigerian tribal culture.

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966), a poetry collection by Seamus Heaney. In this work, Heaney depicts childhood, reflects on identity, and concerns the settings of rural Ireland.

*Catfish and Mandala* (2000), a novel by Andrew Pham. In this work, the author visits his native Vietnam to find his true self and his place in two cultures.

*Sovereign Bones* (2007), stories and essay collected by Eric Gansworth. In this book, Native American authors write on the imperative of keeping a collective identity.

ies; Wong also praises the "skeletal story conveyed with all the cadence and intonation of poetry; the powerful evocation of imposed silence...rendered with aching beauty in the prose." In his essay *Speaking the Silence: Joy Kogawa's 'Obasan'*, Willis examines Kogawa's use of silence, speech, and insight in *Obasan*, arguing that in this work Kogawa "wishes to define, in relation to each other, Japanese and Canadian ways of seeing, and even to combine these divergent perceptions in an integrated and distinctive vision...the book is an imaginative triumph over the forces that militate against expression of our inmost feelings." Likewise, Edward M. White praises the book in his review *The Silences That Speak from Stone* and calls attention to the significance of its voice, "Kogawa's novel must be heard and admired; the art itself can claim the real last word, exposing the viciousness of the racist horror, embodying the beauty that somehow, wonderfully, survives."

### Responses to Literature

1. Several of Kogawa's works are meditations on the lessons of history. In a group effort, research significant events reflected on in her writings—such as the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan and the subsequent nuclear attack on Hiroshima by the United States. What "lessons" appear to be learned?
2. In *Obasan* Kogawa's narrator notes, "All our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by

the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery." Discuss several ways in which Kogawa uses memory to find, define, and/or establish identity—her own or that of her culture. Provide examples from the texts. For instance, in *Obasan*, Naomi's earliest memories of being one with her mother in womb-like comfort and belonging are thoroughly described.

3. With *Obasan*, writes Gurleen Grewal, "Kogawa proved herself to be among the finest of feminist-humanist writers." Kogawa's feminism is also evident in her poetry, starting with her first collection, *The Splintered Moon* (1968). Research feminism in Canada. Consider surveying the sports world, the educational arena, and the work world of Canada. When did people begin to acknowledge women's equality? How is the movement reflected in Kogawa's work?
4. Several of Kogawa's works isolate a trivial activity that the poet makes meaningful as a ritual and as an experience of belonging to and sharing in the Japanese culture. Identify an example of Kogawa's use of ethnic traditions in her work, and discuss how she depicts a cultural connection through this tradition.

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## ■ Milan Kundera

BORN: 1929, Brno, Czechoslovakia

NATIONALITY: Czech, French

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama

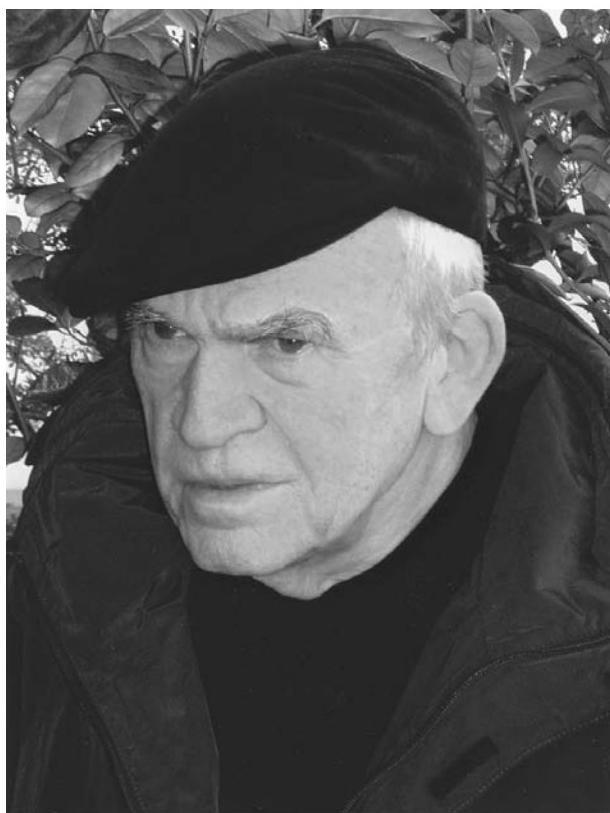
MAJOR WORKS:

*The Joke* (1967)

*Life Is Elsewhere* (1974)

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984)

*The Art of the Novel* (1988)



Milan Kundera © epa / Corbis

## Overview

Milan Kundera is one of the few Czech writers who has achieved wide international recognition. In his native Czechoslovakia and the present-day Czech Republic and Slovakia, Kundera has been regarded as an important author and intellectual since his early twenties. Each of his creative works and contributions to the public political and cultural discourse has provoked a lively debate in the context of its time.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Musical Influence** Born on April 1, 1929, in Brno, Czechoslovakia (in what is now the Czech Republic), Kundera was the son of a pianist and musicologist named Ludvík and his wife, Milada (Janíková). Kundera was educated in music under the direction of Paul Haas and Václav Kapral. Later he attended Charles University and, in 1956, studied at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts, both of which are in Prague. Kundera decided at age nineteen that music was not his true vocation, yet his love of music would influence the structure of his novels, which he patterned after musical compositions.

**Emerging as a Reformer** Kundera began his writing career with three volumes of poetry published between 1953 and 1964. Also during this time, he began writing in the form in which he was the most successful: the novel. Kundera's first book, *The Joke*, published in 1967, was inspired by an incident in 1950; he and another Czech writer, Jan Trefulka, had been expelled from the Communist Party for "anti-party activities." The novel exposes the dangers of living in a humorless world and is the work most responsible for Kundera's emergence as a leader in the reform movement that led to the Czech Republic's 1968 "Prague Spring," a period of attempted reforms and relaxation of authority.

**Censored and Informally Exiled** From the end of World War II until the late 1980s, Eastern Europe was under the firm control of the Soviet Union. Any attempts by Eastern European countries to reject Soviet control were violently squashed. During the so-called Prague Spring, the Czechoslovakian government allowed writers and other artists a level of freedom of expression that the communist country had previously not permitted. However, the reprieve from oppression was short-lived. Soviet tanks rolled into the city and the old "order" was restored. Kundera found himself in the same position as many of the other leaders of the reform movement. His books disappeared from libraries and bookstores; he lost his job at the academy and his right to continue writing and publishing in his native country. His first two novels were published in translation abroad for a foreign audience. Although not initially allowed to travel to the West, Kundera finally was allowed to accept a teaching position in France.

At the Université de Rennes he served as an invited professor of comparative literature from 1975 through 1979. In 1980, he took a professorship at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. The following year, he became a naturalized citizen of France.

**Making an Impact in the United States** *Life Is Elsewhere* (1974), his first major work after his exile, was published in the United States. It deals with revolutionary romanticism and with lyrical poetry as a whole, exploring, among other things, the volatility of the marriage of the two. His next book, *The Farewell Party*, was also published in the United States. This 1976 release satirizes a government-run health spa for women with fertility problems while simultaneously addressing serious ethical questions. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) was republished a year later with an interview the author gave to American novelist Philip Roth. This book illustrates the need for memory to overcome forgetting in order for an individual to achieve self-preservation.

**Success of Unbearable Lightness** In 1984, Milan Kundera's most famous novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, was published. Kundera touched upon his experiences after the Prague Spring in the novel, although some Czech critics complained that certain elements of the story do not ring true: For example, although many professionals were forced to abandon their work and support themselves in menial jobs in the post-1968 clampdown, as happens in the book, the main character of the book, a doctor, would not have been forced to abandon his profession.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* delves into the greatest existential problems that people are faced with: love, death, transcendence, the sense of continuity or "heaviness" that is provided by memory, and the contrasting sense of "lightness" that is brought about by forgetting. The book was adapted as a movie in 1988. Kundera's successful works of the 1970s and 1980s are marked by his own feelings of estrangement and exile, and his homesickness for Prague. In 1989, however, the Soviet Union collapsed and soon thereafter the Eastern European countries that had been its satellites were free to pursue democratic reforms and reopen their societies to the West. Kundera, a French citizen since 1981, remained in Paris.

**Novel Ideas About Fiction** Kundera's most important work outside of his novels is his nonfiction work, *The Art of the Novel*. Published in 1988, the book outlines his theories of the novel, both personal and European. True to the nature of his own novels, this book does not consist of one long essay but of three short essays, two interviews, a list of sixty-three words and their definitions, and the text of a speech.

In *The Art of the Novel* Kundera explains how the history of the novel and the history of European culture are inextricably bound together. Starting with Miguel de

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kundera's famous contemporaries include:

**Václav Havel** (1936–): Czech writer and playwright.

Havel was both the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the new Czech Republic, a capacity he served in for ten years. Starting in the late 1960s, Havel used his writing as a weapon to speak out against his government's authoritarian rule, resulting in multiple arrests and a prison term.

**Miroslav Holub** (1923–1998): Czech poet who worked in unrhymed free verse, almost prose-like. His subjects frequently included doctors and medical researchers, as Holub was himself a practicing immunologist.

**Alexander Dubček** (1921–1992): Czechoslovakian politician who, in the spring of 1968, attempted to reform his country's Communist government, allowing more freedom of expression and open political discourse—"socialism with a human face." The attempt was doomed to be short-lived, and ended in August of that year when Czechoslovakia was occupied by forces from the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact.

**Leonid Brezhnev** (1906–1982): Political leader of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982, the second-longest term after Joseph Stalin's. His regime saw an era of severe economic stagnation and further tightening and deterioration of the Soviet authoritarian regime.

Cervantes and passing through the works of authors such as Samuel Richardson, Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and Franz Kafka, he traces the route of the experience of existence. This route starts from a world of unlimited potential, moves to the beginning of history, the shrinking of possibilities in the outside world, the search for infinity in the human soul, the futility of this search, and into the realm where history is seen as a monster that can offer nothing helpful.

**Lit-Crit and Writers' Rights** In 1995, Kundera published a book-length essay of literary criticism, *Testaments Betrayed*, which is organized after Friedrich Nietzsche's books, with each of its nine parts divided into small sections. Its main, recurring theme focuses on Kundera's firm belief that writers and other artists' prerogatives should be defended and their intentions respected by editors, publicists, and executors.

**Books in French** Kundera began writing novels in French, beginning with 1993's *Slowness*. *Identity* and *Ignorance* followed in 1998 and 2000, respectively. Kundera continues to live and work in Paris.

## Works in Literary Context

**Musical Form** Novelistic unity for Kundera does not exist in a predetermined set of rules. He uses a common theme and a structure based on musical polyphony—the use of many notes playing at the same time, usually in harmony—to tie the sections of his novels together. The lengths and arrangements of chapters, subchapters, and sections are used to create mood and a sense of time, much like in a musical composition. Instead of following the linear story of a character or set of characters, Kundera connects sometimes seemingly unconnectable stories through their related themes and existential situations.

**Structuralism and Self-Suppression** Kundera is an extremely private person who considers the details of his personal life "nobody's business." This attitude is consistent with the teachings of Czech structuralism, which argues that literary texts should be considered as self-contained structures of signs, without regard to outside reality. In a 1984 interview with the British writer Ian McEwan, Kundera said: "We constantly rewrite our own biographies and continually give matters new meanings. To rewrite history in this sense—indeed, in an Orwellian sense—is not at all inhuman. On the contrary, it is very human."

Kundera also asserts his right as an author to exclude from his body of work "immature" and "unsuccessful" works, as composers do, and he now rejects and suppresses most of his literary output of the 1950s and the 1960s. In his mature fiction, he creates a self-contained world that he constantly analyzes and questions, opening up a multitude of ways of interpreting the incidents he depicts. As Kvetoslav Chvatík points out, Kundera treats the novel as an ambiguous structure of signs; playing with these signs enables him to show human existence as open to countless possibilities, thus freeing human beings from the limitedness of a single unrepeatable life.

**Lightness and Kitsch** Kundera's theme in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is that life is unrepeatable; thus, one cannot go back and correct one's mistakes. This realization leads to a feeling of vertiginous lightness, a total lack of responsibility. The idea of lightness, which Kundera takes from the Greek philosopher Parmenides, and which originally meant playfulness, here turns into lack of seriousness, or meaningless emptiness. Kundera also takes over the concept of kitsch from the German writer Hermann Broch: Kitsch is a beautiful lie that hides all the negative aspects of life and deliberately ignores the existence of death.

## Works in Critical Context

Overall, many critics home in on the political disillusionment of Kundera's work, particularly in the context of his fight against Czechoslovakian social and cultural repression. But some critics go beyond the thematic, focusing

on his disorienting style and marking his fragmented plotting, episodic structure, and authorial intrusions as distracting. Still other critics laud Kundera's approach, appreciating his use of humor, his erotic themes, and his sense of narrative play.

**The Unbearable Lightness of Being** When *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* appeared in 1984, it immediately became an international best seller, garnering awards throughout the world, including a Los Angeles Times Book Award. Contemporary reviews of the novel were largely positive. Paul Gray, in a *Time* review, calls *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* "a triumph of wisdom over bitterness, hope over despair." Thomas DePietro in *Commonweal* focuses attention on the heart of the book. He observes that it is a work of "burning compassion, extraordinary intelligence, and dazzling artistry." DePietro also notes the book "leaves us with many questions, questions about love and death, about love and transcendence. These are our burdens, the existential questions that never change but need to be asked anew."

Not all reviewers were enchanted with the book, however. Christopher Hawtree, for example, in the *Spectator*, faults Kundera for a "most off-putting" title and finds irksome the "elliptical structure" of the work. With faint praise, however, he acknowledges the novel is "a self-referential whole that manages not to alienate the reader."

Scholarly interest in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* continues unabated. Literary critics have found a variety of ways to read the novel. John O'Brien in his book *Milan Kundera and Feminism* focuses on Kundera's representation of women. In *Terminal Paradox*, scholar Maria Nemcová Banerjee takes another tack, reading the novel as if it were a piece of music. Just as Tereza introduces Tomas to Beethoven's quartets, and thus to the seminal phrase "Es muss sein," Kundera introduces the reader to a quartet of characters: "The four leading characters perform their parts in concert, like instruments in a musical quartet, each playing his or her existential code in strict relation to those of the others, often spatially separated but never imaginatively isolated in the reader's mind."

## Responses to Literature

1. Many of Kundera's stories are set in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the twentieth century. Learn more about the political history of Czechoslovakia (part of which is now the Czech Republic) since World War II. What major political and social upheavals has the country experienced? How has the country's political climate affected the life and work of Kundera? Report back to the class with your findings.
2. The government-sanctioned style of literature during much of Kundera's lifetime was "socialist realism." Write a report explaining the basic aesthetic and political principles of the "socialist realist" style in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Kundera was an active participant in political causes, and his political thoughts have often been featured in his novels. Other novels notable for their political themes include:

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Published during a time of increasingly sectional disagreements over the issue of slavery, this novel spread the antislavery message through its dramatic, politicized narrative.

*1984* (1949), a novel by George Orwell. Written as a criticism of totalitarian governments, Orwell's novel has continued to serve as a watchword against infringement on personal freedoms—the image of Big Brother is perhaps one of the most recognizable political boogymen.

*Fahrenheit 451* (1953), a novel by Ray Bradbury. Written as a critique of the hysteria in American society during the early years of the Cold War, Bradbury's short novel has since taken on other political overtones, particularly in the debate over banning books.

writing and in other art forms. What is the history of the "socialist realist" style?

3. In part six of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera writes at length about the notion of "kitsch." Define kitsch. Find examples in magazines of kitsch from modern American culture. Create a collage using these images that gives the viewer insight as to the role of kitsch in the United States.
4. Reread the sections of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* that describe Tereza's dreams. Read several entries on dreams from psychology textbooks or reference works. Write an informal essay about what these books reveal about Tereza's dreams. What do the dreams say about her?

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## Hari Kunzru

BORN: 1969, London

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Impressionist* (2002)  
*Transmission* (2004)  
*Noise* (2005)  
*My Revolutions* (2007)

### Overview

Though Hari Kunzru's career is still relatively short, he has already achieved much acclaim. He is a major figure in England's writing scene, working for various magazines, editorial boards, and publishing a steady stream of critically acclaimed books. In 1999 the *Observer* honored him as their Young Travel Writer of the Year, and in 2003 he was listed as one of *Granta* literary magazine's Best Young British Novelists.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Inspired by Mixed Heritage** The son of a man from the Kashmir province in India and a British woman, Hari Kunzru grew up in Essex. He studied English at Oxford, earned a degree in philosophy and literature from the University of Warwick, and went on to work as a journalist for several periodicals. As a travel correspondent, he published essays in the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and *Time Out* magazine, among others.

Kunzru's familial background inspired him to write *The Impressionist* about an Indian-English young man, Pran Nath. Kunzru told Richard Alleyne of the *London Daily Telegraph*, "At Oxford, I noticed how much people play out a comedy of Englishness, which made me very interested in identity role-playing in post-colonial Britain." Kunzru completed the work in a little more than two years, and the novel made headlines in the media even before it was published, due to Kunzru's exceptionally large advance.

Part of what motivates *The Impressionist* is the open-mindedness Kunzru gained from his mixed heritage. In one interview with the *London Independent Sunday*, he stated, "I've always been very scared of people who are certain.... Nothing terrifies me more than a religious fundamentalist who really knows what right is and is prepared to do violence to what they consider is wrong.... I wanted to write in praise of the unformed and fluid."

**A Writer of Tomorrow** Exploring his varied cultural past—and once again, the culture of many people around the world—Kunzru published his second novel, *Transmission*, in 2004. The protagonist, a computer programmer who moves to America, was likely influenced



Hari Kunzru David Levinson / Getty Images

by Kunzru's personal experience working for *Wired* magazine, which focuses on new developments in technology. His first book of short stories, *Noise*, was published in 2005.

Kunzru declined the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *The Impressionist* because it was awarded by the *London Mail on Sunday*, which he felt was a racist publication. He received a *New York Times* notable book of the year distinction for *Transmission*, and in 2007 he published *My Revolutions*, a novel about a former activist from the 1960s who has since gone underground. His work has been translated into at least eighteen languages. Kunzru has been called one of the world's "fifty writers of tomorrow."

### Works in Literary Context

**Travels in Search of Identity** Kunzru's *The Impressionist* revolves around the efforts of a young man of mixed heritage to make a place for himself in the world. Travel as a theme becomes apparent as the protagonist sheds his identity and his belongings in each country. This same theme runs through Kunzru's other works. In fact, on Kunzru's personal Web site, he includes excerpts from his published travel essays, which span the years from 1998 to 2003, taking the reader from New Zealand and Azerbaijan to Benin and Finland. Kunzru

seems to lose himself in the culture and custom of each place, as this excerpt from his visit to Jordan illustrates:

Though I know (or at least believe) that I am alone—except for my guide Atiq and his placid camel—I have a peculiar feeling that the land itself is watching me. This is confirmed when a quivering forty-foot column of sand forms out of nothing and starts making its way towards me. I come to the conclusion that this would be an opportune moment to abandon my atheistical city ways and start grovelling to whatever desert spirit I have just disturbed.

**The Unpredictable Pace of Technology** Kunzru's experience as a techno-journalist resonates thematically through his work. In *Transmission*, brilliant computer programmer Arjun Mehta is lured, under false pretenses, to a fictitious job in the United States. He is hired at an antivirus company but writes and releases the Leela virus, an especially pernicious bug that shuts down vital utilities and devastates global business. But even before *Transmission*, in his 1997 essay, "You Are Cyborg," Kunzru addressed important questions about the future of humankind, technology, and society: "When technology works on the body, our horror always mingles with intense fascination. But exactly how does technology do this work? And how far has it penetrated the membrane of our skin?" Kunzru was always interested in the intersection of people and machines, but his interest grew when he returned to school for a master's degree in literature and philosophy. As Kunzru noted in a *Book Page* interview, "I ended up going down the corridor and hanging out with people interested in artificial intelligence and networks. I became fascinated with the way technology has an impact on society."

### Works in Critical Context

The award-winning Kunzru appeals to critics and readers alike. *Publishers Weekly* contributor Steven Zeitchik called Kunzru "an eloquent author who combines a precocious sweep of history with a keen eye for the future." Similarly, many critics praise Kunzru's unique blend of technological, racial, and historical issues, like Alden Mudge who, at first, does not see the "connection between an edgy interest in the broad societal impacts of technology and a fascination with the waning days of the British Empire" in *The Impressionist*, but then lauds the author for the way he combines these unlikely subjects.

**The Impressionist** Kunzru's first book *The Impressionist* marked him as a mature writer with carefully crafted language, setting, and subject. *The Impressionist* "is a picaresque stitch," wrote David Kipen in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "a deadly serious book about race and empire that can still put a reader on the floor with the exquisitely timed comic understatement of its language." Although *London Daily Telegraph* critic David Flusfeder noted that "anachronisms abound," he also commented on "some lovely writing." *New York Times* contributor

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kunzru's famous contemporaries include:

**Cate Blanchett** (1969–): Born Catherine Élise Blanchett, the Australian actress is known for her award-winning roles in the films *Elizabeth*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Aviator*.

**Salman Rushdie** (1947–): This Indian-British novelist received death threats from the Ayatollah Khomeini for his book *Satanic Verses*.

**David Mitchell** (1969–): This British author has won many of the same awards as Kunzru and also writes about the connectivity of people all over the world. His 2004 novel, *Cloud Atlas*, perhaps best demonstrates this inclusiveness.

**Zadie Smith** (1975–): Most famous for *White Teeth*, this novelist moved to England from Jamaica as a child and continues to write about mixed races coming together.

Janet Maslin concluded, "Nothing about *The Impressionist* flags it as a first effort. Mr. Kunzru writes with wry certitude and cinematic precision about identity, aspiration, and rootlessness, set against the backdrop of a Britannia that is pure mirage."

**Transmission** Critics have differing opinions on Kunzru's pacing in *Transmission*; however, they all applaud his attention to characterization and story development. "This is not a coming-of-age novel—it is a coming-apart novel," commented Nora Seton about *Transmission* in the *Houston Chronicle*. "Like an old PC, the novel starts slow, but once it finally boots up, the momentum of the interconnected stories is impressive and engaging, bolstered by Kunzru's carefully considered details and his lively portrayal of an increasingly globalized technocracy that blends the world's cultures even as it further isolates its individuals," observed Stephen M. Deusner in a review on the *Book Reporter* Web site. "Kunzru keeps his clever plot's wheels spinning merrily, all the while tracing the social and emotional consequences of Arjun's mingled indignation, guilt and fear," stated Bruce Allen in *Hollywood Reporter*.

### Responses to Literature

1. Think about how Kunzru's views on how technology affects society are reflected in his fiction and nonfiction. Write a short story or personal essay that expresses your views on how technology affects society. If you choose to write a personal essay, you may use examples from Kunzru's work to support your opinions.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In both his fiction and nonfiction, Kunzru examines technology and what scientific progress does to interpersonal communication. Here are some other works that talk about computers while exploring human nature and that speculate about the future while investigating the present.

- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film directed by Stanley Kubrick. HAL, a computer, tries to commandeer a spaceship in this groundbreaking film.
- Blade Runner* (1982), a film directed by Ridley Scott. In this film, nonhuman cyborg "replicants" attempt an uprising.
- Neuromancer* (1984), a novel by William Gibson. In this novel about a computer hacker, the word *cyberspace* makes its first appearance.
- Emergence* (2001), a book by Stephen Berlin Johnson. This book explores the habits and patterns of ants and cities, and relates them to the way we use the Internet.

2. Search on the Internet for one of Kunzru's essays that focuses on technology. Write your own essay that describes how the ideas in that essay reflect ideas in Kunzru's novel *Transmission*. Use examples from both texts to support your ideas.
3. Research Bollywood using resources on the Internet or from your library. Create an audio/visual report exploring how Kunzru's protagonist views Bollywood in *Transmission*. Remember to define Bollywood for the class and to use examples from Kunzru's text to support your ideas.
4. With a classmate, discuss whether or not you trust Pran Nath of *The Impressionist*. Does Kunzru want you to like him, or is he more of a symbolic character?
5. Kunzru has said he was influenced by Rudyard Kipling while writing *The Impressionist*. With a classmate, research Rudyard Kipling using resources on the Internet or from your library. Compile your findings and discuss how Kipling may have influenced Kunzru. Use texts from both Kipling and Kunzru to support your opinions.

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## Thomas Kyd

BORN: 1558, London, England

DIED: 1594, London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Ur-Hamlet* (c. 1589)

*The Spanish Tragedy* (1592)

*Cornelia* (1594)

*The Truth of the Most Wicked and Secret Murdering of John Brewen* (1592)

## Overview

Although little is documented in the historical record of Thomas Kyd's life and work, it is clear that he was a playwright who made important contributions to the repertoire of the public playhouse during the Elizabethan era and beyond. Kyd is best known for *The Spanish Tragedy*, a great popular success that established the genre of "revenge tragedies" and greatly influenced the course of English drama.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Mysterious Beginnings** There exists very little evidence of Kyd's life as context for his influence on Elizabethan drama. Except for one spectacular event—his arrest for libel in 1593—the biographical record is uncertain.

Kyd lived his entire life during the Elizabethan era, the time period during which Queen Elizabeth I ruled England and Ireland. The era lasted from 1558 until her death in 1603, and was most notable for two great accomplishments: The rise of British sea superiority, demonstrated by both the British defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the extensive oceanic explorations of Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh; and the advancement of English theater to a popular and enduring art form, demonstrated by the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

Historians believe that an infant named Thomas Kyd, baptized on November 6, 1558, is the playwright; if so, then he would be the son of Francis Kyd, a London secretary of some standing, and his wife, Anna. Thomas was enrolled in 1565 at Merchant Taylors' School, and there is no evidence of college attendance. There is also little trace of his name in the theatrical records. There is one notice that associates him with the Queen's Company during the period 1583–1585. *The Spanish Tragedy* was first published in 1592, anonymously. Scholars can trace its authorship only because of three lines quoted and attributed by Thomas Heywood in his *Apology for Actors* (1612). For all its popularity, the play was never printed under Kyd's name until the eighteenth century. Kyd is also often attributed a 1588 translation of Torquato Tasso's *Il Padre di Famiglia*. Scholars are certain, however, that Kyd produced a translation of Robert Garnier's *Cornélie* in 1594.

**A Brief Flash of Fame** This almost invisible life suddenly flared in May 1593 with Kyd's arrest for the publication of a group of anonymous libels and alleged atheistic statements. Kyd denied the charges and shifted the blame to his one-time housemate, the playwright Christopher Marlowe, claiming that some of their papers got shuffled together. Marlowe was summoned by the law soon after Kyd's arrest, then released on the condition that he report back daily, but soon afterward

Marlowe was killed in an apparent dispute over a tavern bill. Kyd was released, but he never fully recovered his health or his literary reputation. In one of his letters, Kyd refers to his "pains and undeserved tortures," presumably suffered during interrogation. He died one year later at the age of thirty-five, in poverty, leaving no trace of his burial.

The Elizabethan era saw many struggles between the various European powers as they fought over trade routes across the ocean. One notable event was Spain's victory over Portugal in 1592, which is the historical setting for *The Spanish Tragedy*. Using an unusual method for an Elizabethan dramatist, Kyd seems to have worked from no particular source for the play, so he was free to invent his characters and situations. It would probably be misleading, however, to look for too much influence from history or Kyd's personal life in the content of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Neither the main plot nor a somewhat tangential Portuguese subplot is based on any specific event. Some details show a casual acquaintance with military history and Spanish geography, and a few incidents may or may not have been inspired by English politics. For the most part, however, Kyd should be given credit for his originality and invention.

## Works in Literary Context

**Influence on Hamlet** Thomas Kyd's place in the history of English Renaissance drama is secured by one surviving play, *The Spanish Tragedy*. But Kyd's most lasting influence has come from a play that no longer exists—even the title is unknown.

There is evidence that Kyd wrote a play known simply as the *Ur-Hamlet*, which was the immediate source for William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. There is no sign that Kyd's play was ever printed. Reconstructions of the play rely heavily on the strong similarities between Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* and how they each differ from the Danish source material for the original Hamlet story. The device of the play-within-a-play, a key feature of *Hamlet* and many other Elizabethan dramas, probably began with Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*. It seems reasonable as well to credit Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet* with introducing the character of Hamlet's father's ghost, and the addition of Hamlet's own death was also probably Kyd's innovation. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has gone on to be the most performed, admired, adapted, and studied play in the history of world drama, and many have claimed it to be one of the greatest—if not the greatest—single pieces of English literature.

**The Revenge Tragedy** Kyd helped to formulate and popularize revenge tragedies, the dominant mode of drama throughout the Elizabethan period. Loosely inspired by the bloody tragedies of the classical Roman dramatist Seneca (4 BCE–CE 65), revenge tragedies tended

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Kyd's famous contemporaries include:

**John Ward** (1553–1662): One of the most notorious English pirates, Ward, at the height of his powers, commanded a large fleet of stolen ships and terrorized merchant ships throughout the Mediterranean.

**Sigismund III Vasa** (1566–1632): King of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from 1587 to 1632, he attempted to bring about a political union between Poland and Sweden. His efforts resulted in decades of warfare between the two states that lasted until the 1660s. This outbreak of violence ended a long period of cultural and economic progress in Poland known as the Polish Golden Age.

**Alonso de Guzmán El Bueno** (1550–1615): Commander of the Spanish Armada, this relatively inexperienced naval officer took most of the blame for the crushing defeat of the Armada in 1588, an event that elevated Britain's Queen Elizabeth to a position of unprecedented and unchallenged power throughout Europe. In reality, El Bueno fought courageously despite tempestuous weather and poor military strategy devised by the king's advisers.

**Thomas Hobbes** (1588–1679): English philosopher who argued that information from our senses is the basis of all knowledge, not intuition or spiritual revelation. In his controversial *Leviathan* (1651), human nature is portrayed as essentially selfish.

**Ben Jonson** (1572–1637): English poet and dramatist. Jonson, along with Shakespeare and Marlowe, dominated the Elizabethan theater. Jonson's "comedies of humour" were particularly popular with their technique of assigning characters with one dominant personality trait (or "humour"). Jonson also wrote in almost every available verse form of the time and made significant contributions to literary criticism.

to feature a hero driven by vengeance, a ghost of a murdered kinsman who appears and demands justice, characters going mad or feigning madness, at least one scene in a graveyard, plenty of sword fighting and imaginative uses of gore (mutilation, severed limbs, cannibalism, etc.), and scenes of physical or mental torture. Just as horror movies are often blockbusters today, Kyd's formula for revenge tragedy proved to be box office dynamite. The more the Puritans objected to its immorality and bad influence, the more people packed the theaters.

From 1660 into the eighteenth century, fashion championed "heroic tragedies" that showed high-minded heroes choosing between their responsibilities to their loved ones and their duty to their country (the correct

choice for the men was always duty to country; for the women, it was responsibilities to loved ones). Even in their stark differences to the violence and madness of the revenge tragedies, these plays show the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy*—by trying to establish their own originality and cultural relevance for a new "enlightenment" age. These plays self-consciously used Kyd's work as a model for everything they tried not to be. Revenge was often a theme in nineteenth-century drama, although the context was more often domestic and sentimental.

### Works in Critical Context

Recent scholarship on Kyd often falls into the categories of either theatrical performance studies or sociopolitical interpretations. *The Spanish Tragedy* is a revealing choice to examine what Elizabethan performance may have looked like. Richard Kohler has found the play's language to give valuable evidence for staging methods, and the popularity of the play and its violent special effects illuminate the experience of play going during the period.

New Historicism and cultural studies have often turned to Renaissance literature in recent years, following the lead of Stephen Greenblatt, a founder of New Historicism and noted Shakespeare scholar. This approach often searches for ways in which literature influences culture as much as culture influences literature, breaking down the barriers between "text" and "context." For example, New Historicists have pointed out a parallel between the violence of *The Spanish Tragedy* and the form of public executions in sixteenth-century London. Greenblatt, along with Molly Smith, demonstrates how power has a distinctly theatrical function during Elizabeth's reign, and Kyd more than any other dramatist set the form for how power relates to vengeance, madness, and personal tragedy. James Shapiro, on the other hand, points out how *The Spanish Tragedy* can also be used to challenge many of those assumed relationships.

Political theorists have often observed the British nationalism of *The Spanish Tragedy* in the form of its Spanish and Catholic prejudices. Scholars such as Eric Griffin and Carla Mazzio have studied the play for how it reveals the anxiety and ambiguity that goes along with increasing nationalism, as was the case in Elizabeth's England, particularly after her navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588.

While a majority of recent critics focus on the play within its historical moment, critics from earlier in the twentieth century tended to look at *The Spanish Tragedy* as a stand-alone piece of literature. Kyd was claimed as a master of dramatic technique, carefully weaving together plots and subplots to develop dramatic action. Others appreciated his powerful use of rhetoric and blank verse (perhaps influenced by, and influencing, his friend Christopher Marlowe). These views were controversial, however, as critics such as Fredson Bowers have argued just as

persuasively that Kyd's work is technically immature, his characters do not have explainable motivations, and the use of subplots dilutes the impact of the tragedy.

## Responses to Literature

- Evaluate the rhetoric of *The Spanish Tragedy*. What are some of the great speeches and monologues from the characters, particularly Hieronimo? How are they structured, what rhetorical devices do they use, and how exactly do they achieve their effect? If you like, research what an educated Elizabethan would have known and expected about rhetoric in the theater and elsewhere.
- Evaluate Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* as revenge tragedies in light of their debt to *The Spanish Tragedy*. What do these two Shakespeare plays share, and how are they different? Can the elements of both these similarities and differences be found in *The Spanish Tragedy*?
- Do you think that *The Spanish Tragedy* endorses or condemns the idea of taking the law into your own hands and finding justice through violent revenge? Why?
- Do some research on the nature of "special effects" on the Elizabethan stage, and look for the places in *The Spanish Tragedy* where they would have been used. How would Elizabethan actors have handled the appearance of ghosts, severed limbs and heads, bleeding wounds, explosions, and so on?

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Psychologists and critics alike often study the question of why audiences often turn to extreme violence for entertainment. Perhaps it is because horror is one of the most intense human emotions, perhaps it is because disgust has its own kind of fascination, or perhaps because there is a kind of dark humor in the originality and creativity of the villains. The following are works that use extreme violence to drive plot and create meaning:

*Titus Andronicus* (1594), a play by William Shakespeare.

Considered by some to be Shakespeare's least successful play, *Titus* is filled with overt violence: The hero, insane after the rape and dismemberment of his daughter, decapitates the criminals and bakes their heads in a pie that he feeds to their mother.

*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), a treatise by Edmund Burke. In this influential work, Burke makes the first cogent argument for the artistic merit of horror in literature.

*The Road* (2006), a novel by Cormac McCarthy. This book, one of the most violent novels ever to win a Pulitzer Prize, is the postapocalyptic survival story of a father and his son traveling across a wasteland populated by desperate marauders. McCarthy uses these vividly described, amoral villains as points of contrast with human instincts for decency and civilization.

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## Paer Lagerkvist

BORN: 1891, Vaexjö, Sweden

DIED: 1974, Stockholm, Sweden

NATIONALITY: Swedish

GENRE: Fiction, drama, poetry

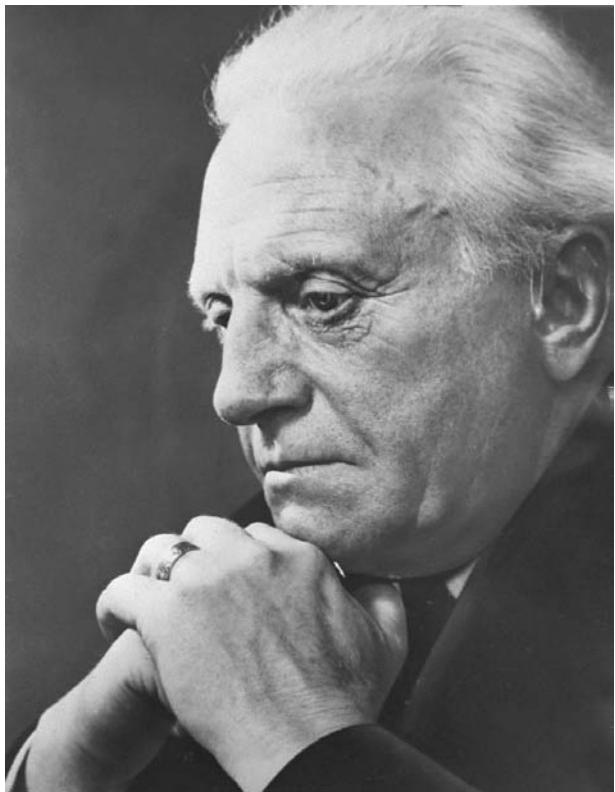
MAJOR WORKS:

*Literary Art and Pictorial Art: On the Decadence of Modern Literature, on the Vitality of Modern Art* (1913)

*Barabbas* (1951)

*Pilgrim at Sea* (1962)

*The Holy Land* (1966)



Paer Lagerkvist *Lagerkvist, Par F.*, photograph. The Library of Congress.

## Overview

Regarded as one of the foremost Swedish literary figures of the twentieth century, Lagerkvist displayed throughout his career a concern with metaphysical and moral issues arising from conflicts between science, religion, and human conduct. Influenced by innovations in French modernist painting, as well as by the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin and the expressionist techniques of dramatist August Strindberg, Lagerkvist's work often incorporates elements from folktales, fables, and myths and is characterized by obscure symbolism, abstract imagery, and simple, unadorned language.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**An Early Rejection of Tradition** Paer Lagerkvist was born on May 23, 1891, in the city of Växjö in the southern Swedish district of Småland. Even though he was raised in an atmosphere of provincialism and religious orthodoxy, Lagerkvist rejected these values, and in 1913, following a year of study at the University of Uppsala, he traveled to Paris, where he became acquainted with the fauvist, cubist, and "naivist" movements in the visual arts. He found himself deeply impressed with both the intellectual discipline and aesthetic innovations of these groups.

### Bitter Belief against a Backdrop of Global Gloom

Lagerkvist's early work was dark, lyrical, and pessimistic. Deeply disturbed by immense destructiveness of World War I (1914–1918), his writings of this era feature the conflict between traditional Christian and modern scientific-determinist views. Lagerkvist's works were largely concerned with man's relationship to God, with the meaning of life, and with the conflict between good and evil. Although Lagerkvist's later works were thematically similar to his earlier works, they became more accessible, less pessimistic, and more realistic. Eventually Lagerkvist came to believe that good and love could triumph over evil. His play *Han som fick leva om sitt liv* (*He who lived his life over again*), published in 1928, is generally regarded as the beginning of the more mature, optimistic period of his writing.

### Salvation for the Damned: A New (Old) Vision of Humanity

In his later years, Lagerkvist devoted himself primarily to writing the novels for which he is perhaps best known outside of Sweden. Working in the wake of the global catastrophe that was World War II (1939–1945) Lagerkvist was, like much of the world, nearly desperate for a vision of hope. During World War II, Sweden maintained its neutrality while Germany pursued a policy of aggressive territorial expansion and the systematic murder of six million European Jews. At the time, many in Sweden objected to their government's lack of involvement in fighting the Nazis.

Beginning with *Barabbas* (1950), Lagerkvist assembled a cycle of narratives that continued his examination of humanity's unending quest for meaning. One of Lagerkvist's most acclaimed works, *Barabbas* has been adapted for both stage and film; it was after its publication that Lagerkvist received the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1951).

**Death of a Tyrant's Wife** Lagerkvist's final novel, *Herod and Mariamne* (1967), tells the story of Herod the Great, the tyrannical king of Judaea, and of his love for his queen, the good and compassionate Mariamne. Published a year after the death of his wife, Lagerkvist acknowledged the autobiographical element in *Herod and Mariamne*, writing that the sense of loss experienced by Herod was his own at the death of his wife. Although he continued to make preliminary sketches for new literary works, Lagerkvist published nothing else thereafter. His final notebook, begun in 1970, reveals his continued literary activity and traditional literary themes; it runs to more than one thousand pages and consists primarily of personal reflections on his ambivalent relationship to God and on his own approaching death. Paer Lagerkvist died in Stockholm on July 11, 1974.

## Works in Literary Context

Lagerkvist's early work functioned as a reaction against contemporary literary trends. In 1913, in fact, Lagerkvist began a period in his career in which he

deliberately tried to incorporate the trends in the visual arts—expressionism, cubism, and fauvism, in particular—into his literary art. In his later career, however, Lagerkvist turned to a much more traditional source of inspiration: the Bible. Lagerkvist's best-known work is based on a character from the Bible and incorporates the simplistic narrative structure of vast portions of the Bible.

**In Search of a New Literature** Lagerkvist became acquainted with the fauvist, cubist, and “naivist” movements in the visual arts during a trip to France in 1913. Impressed with both the intellectual discipline and aesthetic innovations of these groups, Lagerkvist issued the theoretical pamphlet *Literary Art and Pictorial Art: On the Decadence of Modern Literature, on the Vitality of Modern Art*. In this, his first literary manifesto, Lagerkvist calls for a renewal of literature that would parallel the dynamic developments and formal experimentation in contemporary art. He put his principles into action in his next publications, including *Motifs* (1914), a collection of poetry and prose, and *Iron and Men* (1915), a collection of five short stories that deal with human existence in the face of the violence and anxiety of World War I. Both display Lagerkvist's attempts to put principles of cubism into literary practice, but there is a degree of stylization and a tension between violent content and artistic form that has led these to be considered among Lagerkvist's least successful works.

**Back to the Bible** In the majority of his works published between 1950 and 1967—a total of six novels and one collection of poetry—Lagerkvist's primary focus is the examination of the relationship between the human and the divine—specifically, humanity's relationship to the Christian God. In *Barabbas*, the scant biblical references to the robber and insurrectionist who was released instead of Christ are Lagerkvist's starting point for a masterly novel about the relationship between doubt and faith, the human and the divine. Lagerkvist uses a sparse but monumental style, consciously modeled on that of the Bible but also owing much to the narrative techniques of popular storytelling.

**A Tradition of External Inspiration** Since Lagerkvist's time, other authors have attempted both to incorporate the conventions of other art forms into literature and to use the Bible as a model for their own writing. As an example, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* attempts to re-create the feeling of listening to jazz music in her novel's plot structure and in her character representation. Meanwhile, Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, like *Barabbas*, takes a relatively minor figure from the Bible and spins an entire novel out of this character's experiences. Indeed, Diamant focuses on the treatment of women during the early biblical period, offering readers a unique view of that period of history.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lagerkvist's famous contemporaries include:

- Boris Pasternak** (1890–1960): In addition to his influential poetry, this Russian author also wrote *Doctor Zhivago*.
- J. R. R. Tolkien** (1892–1973): An English scholar and the author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.
- Wilfred Owen** (1893–1918): An English soldier and poet whose work was critical of World War I, in which he ultimately died—one week before the war ended.
- Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945): The Italian leader of the National Fascist Party in Italy, he met a gruesome end that reflected his own grisly approach to controlling his populace.
- Ho Chi Minh** (1890–1969): A Vietnamese revolutionary and the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam).
- Fatima Jinnah** (1893–1969): A Pakistani political leader who was a prime figure in the Pakistan movement for independence from Great Britain and India.

## Works in Critical Context

Although Lagerkvist's early, most experimental work was largely panned, his later work—particularly *Barabbas*—has received mostly positive reviews. Critics note its sleek, spare style on the one hand, and its effortless combination of realism with spiritual conflict on the other. Nonetheless, some critics have argued that Lagerkvist does not take enough time or effort to flesh out his characters and, instead, presents flat, unrealistic characters.

**Barabbas** Lagerkvist was virtually unknown in the United States until the publication of the English translation of *Barabbas* in 1951, the same year he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. The novel is the story of the condemned thief whose place Christ took on the cross. In a review of the novel, Graham Bates remarks, “The work combines the utmost physical realism with an intensity of spiritual conflict not often equaled in the retelling of Biblical tales. Paer Lagerkvist has taken a man barely mentioned in the New Testament and has built him into a character as real, as evil, and as good as he must have been to the men who knew him those centuries ago. This is no outline sketch in black and white but a deeply conceived and richly colored portrait of a man driven beyond the powers of his endurance by a force he could never actually believe in.”

Charles Rollo calls *Barabbas* a “small masterpiece,” observing, “In a prose style that is swift, sparing, limpid, and hauntingly intense in its effects—a style whose energy and beauty the translator, Alan Blair, has magnificently

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

*Barabbas* reinterprets a traditional character from a new perspective. Here are a few works that attempt to rethink the importance and personalities of famous and infamous figures in terms of contemporary values:

*Marie Antoinette* (2006), a film directed by Sophia Coppola. Marie Antoinette—historically seen as a queen whose excesses so enraged her people that they beheaded her—is presented in this film as a lonely young girl married to an impotent and uninterested man.

*Romeo + Juliet* (1996), a film directed by Baz Luhrmann. By changing the setting of this famous Shakespeare play to a contemporary one, the film attempts to point out the fact that, above all else, the two lovers' plight is a result of teenage anger, repression, and sexual drive.

*A Thousand Acres* (1991), a novel by Jane Smiley. In this novel, Smiley reimagines the relationship Shakespeare's King Lear had with his daughters using contemporary Iowa as a setting. Smiley suggests that Lear was a drunken child molester and that the daughters must find a way to survive their father by joining together.

preserved—Lagerkvist evokes the early Christian era with a selective realism more telling than any ponderously detailed reconstruction of the past. Every image sustains the feeling, ‘That is the way things were’; every movement in the story has an unerring rightness.” Harvey Breit has praised Lagerkvist for taking “a complex moral theme” and constructing the tale “with a craftsman’s complete mastery and simplicity,” synthesizing “an elaborate, moral vision and austere poetic style.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *Barabbas*. What effect do you believe Lagerkvist was trying to achieve by basing his biblical characters less on the traditional, biblical representation and more on people from Lagerkvist’s own life? Do you believe he achieved this effect? Cite specific examples from the text to support your response.
2. Using the Internet and the library, research cubism, expressionism, and fauvism. Then read *Iron and Men*. In what ways do you think this text exemplifies the values of these visual art traditions? Cite specific passages from the text and paintings from the various art traditions in your response.
3. Read Lagerkvist’s *Pilgrim at Sea*. Based on your reading of the text, do you agree with Michele Murray’s assessment that Lagerkvist’s characters in this text are merely “mouthpieces of Good or Evil or

Lust or Cupidity,” not fully fleshed-out characters? Why or why not?

4. To understand what it is like to interpret the values of one art form into the traditions of another, consider a painting, sculpture, poem, film, or novel that you enjoy. Then, attempt to represent in one of the other art forms the experience you have contemplating the work of art you enjoy. For instance, if you enjoy the film *Reality Bites*, try to re-create the impression of this film in a painting or sculpture. If you like the sculptures of Giacometti, try to write a short story that explores the life of one of his figures.

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## Alex La Guma

BORN: 1925, Cape Town, South Africa

DIED: 1985, Cuba

NATIONALITY: South African

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Walk in the Night* (1962)

*In the Fog of the Season’s End* (1972)

### Overview

Alex La Guma was a committed opponent of apartheid, and his overriding concern in his writings was to expose its evils and help bring about its downfall. Since this system of government has come to an end in South Africa, his fiction has become an important social and

historical testament of the apartheid era. Through his vivid descriptions of person and place, and particularly in his accurate rendition of the idioms and peculiarities of polyglot Cape Town, he captured the appalling racial conditions that existed.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**In the Shadow of Apartheid** Justin Alexander La Guma was born February 20, 1925, in a working-class ghetto of Cape Town, South Africa. Like most members of their community, his parents were of mixed race, which meant that they were classified as "Coloured" under the South African government's policy of racial segregation known as apartheid, which is Afrikaans for "separateness." This government-sponsored system involved designating certain buildings, areas, and services for use only by certain races, and forbade people of different races from marrying. It also led to the segregation of living areas within South Africa, with black citizens of different cultural groups kept separate from each other. This allowed the white Afrikaners, the descendants of European colonists who made up a small percentage of the population, to remain in control of the large non-white population.

His father was Jimmy La Guma, president of the South African Coloured People's Organisation and member of the Central Committee of the South African Communist Party, which was the first nonracial political party in South Africa; his mother, Wilhelmina Alexander La Guma, was a worker in a cigarette factory. In 1942, Alex La Guma left high school without graduating, but completed graduation examinations in 1945 as a night student at Cape Technical College and in 1965 was a correspondence student at the London School of Journalism. In November 1954, he married Blanche Herman, a nurse and midwife, with whom he had two sons, Eugene and Bartholomew.

**Political Activity** A member of the Cape Town district Communist Party until it was banned in 1950, La Guma worked on the staff of the leftist newspaper *New Age*. He came to the government's notice in 1955, when he helped draw up the Freedom Charter, a declaration of rights for all South Africans, regardless of race. In 1956, he was accused of treason because of his political activism. In December of that same year La Guma published his first short fiction, "A Christmas Story," in the journal *Fighting Talk*.

In 1961, he was arrested for helping to organize a strike and was detained for seven months. In 1962, he was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. This meant that he was barred from leaving his house, communicating with friends, participating in politics, and practicing journalism.

Up until his banning, La Guma continued to work as a journalist for *New Age*. Besides his news reports, he wrote a weekly column and in 1959 created a political cartoon strip. During the time leading up to his house arrest and then while in confinement, La Guma also wrote the majority of his short stories. They are of limited number—only sixteen in all were published—at first appearing locally and then in international magazines and anthologies. Collectively, the stories form a powerful indictment of the evils of apartheid, particularly in relation to the colored community of Cape Town.

**A Walk in the Night and First Novels** La Guma's only novella, *A Walk in the Night* (1962), was written prior to his banning and was first published in Nigeria. It immediately became prohibited reading in South Africa. All of the characters in *A Walk in the Night*, whether black, "coloured," or white, suffer as a result of the social system of apartheid. In varying degrees, all have been dehumanized and impoverished by it.

With the publication of *A Walk in the Night*, La Guma established himself as a protest writer of international repute. In October 1963, he and many others were jailed because the government feared a mass insurrection after several major figures of the antiapartheid movement were arrested. La Guma spent five months in prison, three in solitary confinement. In the following year, he published his first full-length novel, *And a Threecord Cord* (1964), mostly written while in jail. Once again La Guma created a world that is inhabited by slum dwellers unable to escape the limits of their socially proscribed existence.

Although La Guma's next novel, *The Stone Country* (1967), was written while he was under house arrest, it was not published until after his departure from South Africa. In 1966, he and his family left for England on permanent exit visas, where he worked in radio and insurance, and as a freelance writer. *The Stone Country*, which draws on the author's own experience of life in South African prisons, appeared some months after his September 1966 arrival in London. Through the central character, George Adams, daily existence in this harsh and alien environment is described in graphic terms, a condition made all the worse for nonwhites by the brutal application of the law governing apartheid.

For eight years he served as chairman of the London branch of the African National Congress, the antiapartheid political organization. During this period, he traveled extensively within Britain and abroad, and, on one occasion, toured the Soviet Union for six weeks. Having been presented by Indira Gandhi with the distinguished Lotus Award of the Afro-Asian Writers Association in New Delhi in 1969, he later attended its Fifth Congress in Tashkent (in today's Uzbekistan), and then became its secretary general. In 1975 he visited Vietnam as a delegate to the World Peace Congress.

**In the Fog of the Seasons' End and Later Work** *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* was published in 1972, in

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

La Guma's famous contemporaries include:

- Chinua Achebe** (1930–): Nigerian novelist and poet; best known for *Things Fall Apart*, which dissects the effects of colonialism on traditional Nigerian society.
- Marc Chagall** (1887–1985): Belarusian-French-Jewish artist known for his sinuous figures and vivid colors.
- Elmore Leonard** (1925–): American mystery novelist and screenwriter. Movies adapted from his work include *Get Shorty* and *3:10 to Yuma*.
- Pol Pot** (1925–1998): Leader of the Khmer Rouge, a communist faction, and president of Cambodia (1976–1979). He is known for his brutal regime and social restructuring under which millions of people died.
- Walter Sisulu** (1912–2003): South African antiapartheid activist and secretary general of the African National Congress (1949). He was jailed for twenty-six years for his political activities.

London, six years after La Guma left South Africa. It had been conceived and substantially written while he was living in South Africa and became his most explicitly autobiographical novel. The subject matter is now directly political, and for the first time there is a clear call to action. The novel develops the familiar theme of the devastating effects that the apartheid-based socioeconomic and political system has on the oppressed people. *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* is La Guma's best-received work. Described by several critics as a major achievement in African literature, it has been translated into twenty languages and has outsold his other books.

*Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), was the first of La Guma's novels to be conceived and written in its entirety outside South Africa. Free of constant harassment and surveillance by the South African security police and able to place all his energies behind the struggle of the liberation movement in exile, he was able to address a central question of South African society in a more revolutionary way. Unlike La Guma's other stories, *Time of the Butcherbird* moves beyond the personal background of the characters into the nation's cultural and political history. The customs and traditions of white Afrikaners are given much greater scope than in his previous novels, with family histories outlined that stretch back to the Boer War (1899–1902) and earlier.

*Time of the Butcherbird* was La Guma's final completed novel, published in London a year after he settled with his family in Havana, Cuba, in 1978. There he served as chief representative of the African National Congress in the Caribbean until his death from a massive

heart attack on October 11, 1985. Shortly before his death, he was awarded the Order of the Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR.

### Works in Literary Context

**The "Englikaans" Style** La Guma's style shows multiple influences, including elements of popular culture from such forms as pulp fiction, American gangster B-movies, and journalism. La Guma combines these elements to startling effect in his short stories, developing a style of writing based on what has been termed "Englikaans," a dialect of Cape Town's mixed-race ghettos that blends Afrikaans with English. "What he gets into the English dialogue," remarks writer and critic Lewis Nkosi, "is really the Afrikaans accents and rhythms of the Cape Malay coloureds' *taal* [speech] and he merges it with English more successfully than any South African writer has done, white or black."

**Propaganda and Protest** Because La Guma was concerned primarily with racial injustice in South Africa, his work has come to be considered part of the tradition of protest fiction that include the works of such writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852), Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906), and Richard Wright (*Native Son*, 1940). While there is no doubt that well-crafted protest novels can exert a huge impact on the public, critics tend to look down on protest fiction, even labeling it propaganda, because, they believe, the writer's art is subjugated by the writer's political message, and characters and plot tend to be less fully rounded than they are in other types of fiction. This point is debatable, but La Guma's literary reputation has suffered somewhat because of his political focus.

### Works in Critical Context

Lewis Nkosi states, "The qualities which make La Guma's fiction so compellingly true and immediate are not simply its fidelity to its own source materials—which is a life of complete and naked brutality under a repressive regime—but the quiet exactness of its tone and the adequacy of its moral pressures."

However, David Rabkin believes that La Guma's fiction increasingly shows "a consistent departure from the typical procedures of the novel form, being concerned rather to illuminate the moral character of South African society, than to portray the personal and moral development of individual characters." A crisis, he concludes, arose in the relation between form and content, turning some of La Guma's later novels into propaganda rather than art.

**A Walk in the Night** *A Walk in the Night*, says Shatto Arthur Gakwandi, avoids "being a sermon of despair [while also evading] advocating sentimental solutions to the problems that it portrays. Without pathos, it creates a powerful impression of that rhythm of violence

which characterizes South African life." He concludes, "All these characters are victims of a system that denies them the facility of living in harmony with fellow human beings and their frustrations find release in acts of violence against weaker members of their society." Michael Wade, who considers the issue of identity as central to *A Walk in the Night*, believes that a "guerilla struggle" is being "waged by life against the forces of negation."

**In the Fog of the Season's End** American novelist John Updike, writing for the *New Yorker*, said of *In the Fog of the Season's End* that it "delivers, through its portrait of a few hunted blacks attempting to subvert the brutal regime of apartheid, a social protest reminiscent, in its closely detailed texture and level indignation, of [Theodore] Dreiser and [Émile] Zola."

South African writer Nadine Gordimer took a somewhat different view, saying: "Alex La Guma... writes, like so many black exiles, as if life in South Africa froze with the trauma of Sharpeville [a massacre of black South African civilians by the police in 1961]. Since he is a good writer, he cannot create at the newspaper-story level, and cannot, from abroad, quite make the projection, at the deeper level, into a black political milieu that has changed so much since he left."

## Responses to Literature

1. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Do you think the commission's work was necessary or unnecessary? Can a country heal without forgiveness? What does it take for the world to forgive a country that has committed serious crimes against humanity? Is this actually an impossibility?
2. Find out more about the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 by reading *Life in the Time of Sharpeville* (1995) by Humphrey Tyler. The book includes firsthand accounts of events leading up to and during the bloody atrocity.
3. Research the lives and action of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, two American civil rights leaders with very different ideas about the best way to achieve change. Write an essay that compares their ideas, and argue for what you think is the better approach to social change.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Apartheid, which in the Afrikaans language means "apartness" or "separateness," was the system of racial discrimination and white political domination adopted by the South African National Party when it came to power in 1948. It ensured the political and economic supremacy of the white minority, which made up less than 20 percent of South Africa's total population in 1948 and less than 13 percent of the population in 1994, the year apartheid was abolished. Here are some other works that deal with the experience of apartheid.

*A Human Being Died That Night* (2004), a nonfiction work by Pumila Gobodo-Madikizela. A black South African clinical psychologist tells of her interviews with Eugene de Kock, who commanded state-sanctioned death squads during apartheid.

*And They Didn't Die* (1990), a novel by Lauretta Ngcobo. This novel tells the tale of a mother in rural South Africa under apartheid, caught between the political system and traditional cultural restrictions.

*Journey of a Hope Merchant* (2004), a memoir by Neal Peterson. This uplifting memoir by Peterson, a professional yacht racer, tells about his life, including growing up "Coloured" (mixed race) and disabled in apartheid-era South Africa.

*Kaffir Boy* (1986), a memoir by Mark Mathabane. A professional tennis player and writer describes his youth growing up black under apartheid in South Africa.

*Mine Boy* (1946), a novel by Peter Abrahams. This coming-of-age story was the first novel written by a black South African to show life through a black South African's point of view.

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## Alphonse de Lamartine

BORN: 1790, Mâcon, France

DIED: 1869, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

"The Lake" (1817)

*Poetic Meditations* (1820)

*Jocelyn, an Episode: Journal Found in the House of a Village Curate* (1836)

*History of the Girondists* (1847)

*Graziella; or, My First Sorrow* (1852)



Alphonse de Lamartine *Lamartine, Alphonse*, lithograph by Ratier.

### Overview

Alphonse de Lamartine, a pioneer of the French Romantic movement, is considered one of the greatest French poets of the nineteenth century. He was also a prominent statesman who wrote a number of historical works that were popular in his day. Lamartine is now remembered as a significant figure in the history of French literature whose poetry marked the transition from the restraints of the neoclassical era to the passion and lyricism of the Romantics.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Of Noble Birth** Descended from minor French nobility, Alphonse Marie Louis de Lamartine was born on October 21, 1790, in the Burgundian town of Mâcon, to Pierre de Lamartine and Alix des Roys de Lamartine. Seven years after Lamartine's birth, the family moved to the nearby village of Milly, where Lamartine grew up frail and sickly.

When Lamartine was eleven, his parents sent him to the Institution Puppier, a boarding school in Lyon, which he hated. He fled the school in December 1802, and his family sent him to the Collège des Pères de la Foi in Belley. Under the direction of former Jesuits, this school was much more to the child's liking. There, he came to

love both language and literature, including the Greek and Latin classics.

Throughout his childhood, France was politically unstable, greatly affecting many French citizens. In 1789, the French Revolution began when the country's legislative body declared itself the National Assembly. After a Paris-based mob physically imprisoned French king Louis XVI and his family, the king was deposed and later executed. Throughout the 1790s, the French people saw several governments form as well as periods of intense violence as different groups fought for control of the country.

**Poor Health and Wild Ways** Because of his worsening health, Lamartine left the Collège des Pères de la Foi in 1808 and returned to Milly, where he remained directionless. His parents refused to allow him to serve in the military or to seek a government position under self-proclaimed French emperor Napoléon Bonaparte, who had taken power in 1799 in a military coup from the moderate, but weak, Directory (a group of five men in whom France's executive power was constitutionally based for four years). It was not long before boredom and Lamartine's renowned good looks got him into trouble. He incurred gambling debts, had several love affairs, and may have fathered a child out of wedlock.

In 1811, his parents sent him to Italy as a distraction, but he pursued his passions for gambling and women there, as well. The stay was not entirely wasted, however,

for he later turned the beauty of the Italian landscape and its women to literary account. He fell in love with a young Neapolitan servant girl named Antoniella, who eventually became the subject of *Graziella; or, My First Sorrow* (1852).

**New Direction** By this time, Napoléon had lost his grip on the vast empire he had built in the early 1800s after a failed attempt to conquer Russia. The emperor was defeated by an alliance of Russia, Prussia, Great Britain, and Sweden in early 1812. Lamartine was made mayor of Milly in May 1812 to avoid recruitment and performed administrative duties during the allied occupation of France. Following the abdication of Napoléon on April 6, 1814, Lamartine was commissioned into the Garde du Corps at Beauvais and the Tuileries. Military life was not to his liking, and he escaped during the Hundred Days (the short-lived, triumphant return of Napoléon from exile to regain control of France) to Switzerland. After Napoléon's second abdication on June 22, 1815, Lamartine returned to France. He rejoined his regiment in Paris in August but resigned soon thereafter because of poor health.

In October 1816, Lamartine went to Aix-les-Bains in Savoy to take a cure. There, he met Julie Charles, the wife of a prominent physicist. They fell in love and spent much of their time together at Lake Bourget. Charles returned to Paris, and Lamartine went back to Milly, but they promised to meet again. The promise would not be fulfilled, as Charles had become too ill to make the journey. Disappointed and lonely, Lamartine composed "The Lake," one of the most famous of all Romantic poems.

**Marrying for Discipline** On Christmas Day 1817, Lamartine learned that Charles had died a week earlier. At this point, he began to think about marriage—not for love but to establish some order in his life. His friends introduced him to various young women, and in June 1820, he married Marianne Eliza Birch, a young English-woman who was from a wealthy family. The couple departed immediately for Naples, where Lamartine had been appointed to the embassy as an attaché.

**Literary Success** Several weeks prior to the marriage, Lamartine anonymously published *Poetic Meditations* (1820). Its success was immediate, and it soon became widely recognized as a Romantic masterpiece. His time in Naples proved to be one of sustained creative activity, for Lamartine's minor diplomatic duties afforded him ample time to write. In addition to several lesser-known works, Lamartine published *New Poetic Meditations* (1823), a collection of verse that enhanced his already substantial reputation as a poet.

Upon his return to France in 1828 (then again ruled by a royalist king, Charles X), Lamartine was defeated in his bid for a seat in the national parliament. He then toured the Middle East. His recollections of this journey

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lamartine's famous contemporaries include:

**Charles Babbage** (1791–1871): British mathematician, philosopher, and mechanical engineer, who is credited with originating the concept of a programmable computer.

**James Buchanan** (1791–1868): The fifteenth president of the United States of America, who served in the period shortly before America's Civil War.

**John Keats** (1795–1821): English poet, who was a central figure in the Romantic movement in literature.

**Percy Bysshe Shelley** (1792–1822): An English Romantic poet and philosopher whose odes and shorter lyrics are often considered among the greatest in the English language.

**Napoléon Bonaparte** (1769–1821): French military and political leader who became the emperor of the French.

are preserved in *A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land* (1835). After leaving the Middle East in 1833, Lamartine moved to Paris, where he served as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, France's national legislative body, until 1851.

In 1836, Lamartine published his next work, *Jocelyn, an Episode. The Fall of an Angel*, the only other completed segment of the projected epic, appeared in 1838. Although Lamartine had been regarded previously as a deeply religious poet, both *Jocelyn* and *The Fall of an Angel* were banned by the Catholic Church, which considered the works to be against traditional faith with their suggestions in favor of rationalism and deism.

**From Poetry to Prose** Beginning in 1839, Lamartine abandoned poetry for prose writing. By 1847, he had completed his multivolume interpretation of the French Revolution, *History of the Girondists*. The work was popular with the general public, even though critics felt that it suffered from a lack of scholarship. Lamartine's career as a statesman reached its apex in 1848 when "citizen-king" Louis-Philippe was ousted in a three-day revolution, and Lamartine became the president of the Second Republic's provisional government. He proved an ineffective leader during this volatile time, and his popularity diminished to such an extent that he was soundly defeated by Louis Napoléon, the nephew of Napoléon Bonaparte, in the presidential election held later that year. By 1852, Louis Napoléon had declared himself Napoléon III and established the Second Empire.

**Retirement** Lamartine retired from politics in 1851 and wrote prolifically until his death in 1869 to support himself and his family. He composed a large body of

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers and poets who also worked in the Romantic style with themes of individualism, passion, the natural or the supernatural:

*Frankenstein* (1818), a novel by Mary Shelley. In this novel, the elements set the pace not only for nineteenth-century literature that challenges science but for the Gothic horror genre that developed after it.

*Intrigue and Love* (1784), a play by Friedrich Schiller. In this drama, manipulation in the upper middle classes leads to disastrous ends.

*Lyrical Ballads* (1798), a poetry collection by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this collaborative effort by two of the founding Romantic poets, common humanity is not only the theme but the subject.

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a Romantic and Gothic novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In this work, Puritan values are closely examined and challenged when they come into conflict with individual values.

prose writings, yet debt continued to burden him. In March 1860, he had to sell much of his property and move into a modest apartment in a less fashionable quarter of Paris. His wife died on May 21, 1863. Although he continued to write, Lamartine ultimately accepted, albeit begrudgingly, a pension that was proposed by Napoléon III and approved by the National Assembly on April 11, 1867. Lamartine was a bitter and sick man when he died on February 28, 1869, in the company of a few friends and his niece, Valentine de Cessiat.

### Works in Literary Context

**Multiple Influences** Lamartine's poetry was most likely inspired by his reading habits. *Poetic Meditations*, for example, not only spoke to the sensibility of his generation but extended the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and François-René de Chateaubriand into verse. Works such as *Graziella* (1852) and its powerful descriptive passages owed much to his responsiveness to the terrain of Italy. Other works such as *The Fall of an Angel* (1838) reflect his travels in the Middle East and his fascination with reincarnation and pantheism. During this time, his religious views were those of an orthodox Catholic. He affirmed the existence of an afterlife and encouraged his readers to accept divine will. Lamartine also based much poetry on the women in his life. His *Graziella* is based on Antoniella, with whom he had had an intimate relationship, and he took inspiration for his *Poetic Meditations* from his passionate affection for Julie Charles.

**Personal and Social Themes on Religion, Nature, and Love** In the period from 1851 to 1869, Lamartine's interest in social change (which influenced his political efforts) permeate his works, such as *Jocelyn* and *The Fall of an Angel*. Concerned with the French workers' quality of life, Lamartine argued for an improved standard of living and promoted honest labor, strict morality, and a return to a rural way of life.

In the two sets of poems in *Graziella*—those inspired by Julie Charles and those addressed to Elvire, his evocation of the universal woman—Lamartine wrote of ideal love and the grief experienced at its loss. In other poems, he described his religious beliefs and emotional reaction to nature. He viewed nature as a manifestation of divine grandeur and believed that its contemplation could inspire religious faith. Similar in subject and tone to *Poetic Meditations*, the work *New Poetic Meditations* includes poems that combine religious topics and idyllic natural settings.

**Neoclassical Style** Lamartine was an early Romantic poet and influence, but he also wrote poetry that was characteristically separate from Romanticism. Highly decorative and elaborate, for example, his work *Poetic Meditations* is neoclassical in style. This is evident in his frequent use of alexandrines (lines of poetic meter in twelve syllables with distinctive characteristics such as caesuras) and, at times, in his phrasing. The poet's experimentation with meter, rhyme, and stanza form created fresh, highly fluid effects. The best-known poems of the collection focus on his relationship with Charles and include Lamartine's most famous single work, "The Lake." In this poem, based on a boat ride with Julie Charles, Lamartine treats the ephemeral nature of life and love, writing in the highly melodious and emotional verse that epitomizes the lyrical or musical qualities of Lamartine's poetry.

Lamartine is considered to have made an impact on the French Romantic movement. Contemporaries Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, Charles Saint-Beuve, and many others of his time generally admitted an admiration for his poetry, even if they disagreed with his politics. Later generations of poets—such as the Parnassians and the Symbolists—might have ridiculed Lamartine's sentimentality, but they owed a debt to his introduction of musicality into French poetry.

### Works in Critical Context

During his lifetime, Lamartine achieved a substantial reputation as a poet and prose writer. By the time of his death, his reputation had waned significantly. His prose works were seldom read, and his verse lost favor with an audience that preferred the more passionate lyrics of the late Romantics. Today, critics agree that his prose writings were marred by hasty composition and are considered of little artistic value. His poetry, however, including Lamartine's most respected work,

*Poetic Meditations*, is still acknowledged as important in some circles.

**Poetic Meditations** This collection of twenty-four poems (later, twenty-six poems) became an astounding critical and popular success when it was first published and is now considered a transitional work that helped pave the way for the French Romantic movement. With both neoclassical and Romantic elements, Lamartine adopted forms common to eighteenth-century poetry and made use of the elegy and ode and themes of love and death. Reflecting the new spirit of nineteenth-century verse, *Meditations* also differs markedly from the emotionally restrained verse of the neoclassical era with its sincere tone, lyric enthusiasm, emotionality, and religious content. *Meditations* is now regarded as the first document of French Romanticism.

In a review of the book published in 1820 in *New Monthly Magazine*, the reviewer comments on Lamartine's evident power as a writer: "Lovers of French literature have long looked in vain for the grand desideratum, a good epic in that language. In the specimen before us there is, we think, great promise for the accomplishment of such a hope."

## Responses to Literature

1. Lamartine was considered the first French writer to use Romanticism to revitalize the art of poetry. Read several of Lamartine's poems. In small groups, discuss what you can deduce about nineteenth-century tastes, values, and desires. What was important to the men and women of the Romantic era?
2. In a group effort, consider several works of poetry, prose, and drama by the writer and find examples of Lamartine's faith. Where in the dialogue, imagery, symbolism, or other elements is a religious theme clear? What message is suggested?
3. How are women depicted in Lamartine's poems *Graziella* and *Poetic Meditations*? Find descriptive phrases, metaphors, or other figures of speech to support your position.
4. Imagine that you have the opportunity to talk to Lamartine. Create a chart of his literary heirs, such as Victor Hugo, William Butler Yeats, and Hart Crane, and explain to Lamartine how he influenced their writing.

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## Charles Lamb

BORN: 1775, London, England

DIED: 1834, Edmonton, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Nonfiction, poetry, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Blank Verse* (1798)

*Tales from Shakespeare* (1807)

*Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived*

*About the Time of Shakespeare* (1808)

*Mrs. Leicester's School* (1809)

*Essays from Elia* (1823)

## Overview

Charles Lamb's elegant prose made him a major essayist of the Romantic era, and has formed a part of the canon of English literature ever since. His essays have delighted generations of readers, and his literary criticism testifies to his versatility and perceptiveness. He was also well-known to his contemporaries as a novelist, journalist, poet, writer for children, and fine critic, devoted to "antiquity"—particularly Latin literature and that of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century writers. His popularity extended through the nineteenth century into the twentieth, but waned after 1934, the centenary of his death. Since the 1960s, however, his reputation has risen again—with the



Charles Lamb *Lamb, Charles, photograph. The Library of Congress.*

publication of new biographical and critical works celebrating and analyzing his artistry becoming something of a cottage industry.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

#### *A Lonely Survivor and an Early Romantic*

Lamb was born in London in 1775, the youngest of seven children, of whom only three survived into adulthood. His father was a law clerk who worked in the Inner Temple, one of the courts of London, and wrote poetry in his spare time. Almost nothing is known about Lamb's mother.

In 1782, Lamb was accepted as a student at Christ's Hospital, a London school for the children of impoverished families. He excelled in his studies, especially in English literature, but the seven years away from home proved lonely. Later, Lamb wrote that his solitude was relieved only by his friendship with a fellow student, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The friendship with Coleridge, who would become one of England's premier Romantic poets, had a particularly strong influence on Lamb's development as a thinker and an artist.

While in school, Lamb also began to experiment with verse. Since his family's poverty prevented him from furthering his education, he also took a job immediately

upon graduation. Working first as a clerk, he became an accountant at the East India Company, a rapacious joint-stock company whose function in the British colonies was at times quasi-governmental and even military. He remained there until his retirement in 1825. In working for the East India Company, Lamb was participating, however distantly, in one of British history's ugliest chapters. The Honourable East India Company, as it was officially known, acquired a monopoly on trade with India and, until this monopoly was limited in 1813, succeeded in colonizing—often quite brutally, as was standard colonial practice—nearly the entire Indian sub-continent. During his career at the East India Company's London offices, Lamb read widely and corresponded frequently with such friends as Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Robert Southey. It was at Coleridge's insistence that Lamb's first sonnets were included in Coleridge's collection *Poems on Various Subjects*, published in 1796.

**Total Mental Collapse** Near the end of 1795, Lamb collapsed and committed himself to a hospital for the mentally ill. Though biographers are uncertain as to the exact cause of his breakdown, they believe it might have been precipitated by unrequited love. Adding to his misfortune, Lamb's sister, Mary, who was mentally ill, stabbed their mother to death in 1796—an event that completely transformed Lamb's life. His father, nearly senile, and his brother, John, wanted to commit Mary permanently to an asylum, but Lamb succeeded in obtaining her release and devoted himself to her care. From then on, Mary enjoyed long intervals of sanity and productivity as a writer, but these were inevitably punctuated by breakdowns. Some biographers attribute Lamb's own bouts of depression and excessive drinking to the stress of worrying about Mary, with whom he was extremely close. During her lucid periods, however, she and Charles lived peacefully together and even adopted a child.

#### *Bringing About an Elizabethan Renaissance*

Lamb's first published works were his sonnets, which critics praised for their simple diction and delicate poetic manner, but he quickly discovered that his greater talent and inclinations lay elsewhere. His first serious work in prose, *A Tale of Rosamund Gray* and *Old Blind Margaret*, appeared in 1798. Lamb, an avid theatergoer, decided to try his hand at drama next; however, *John Woodvil* (1802), a tragedy in the Elizabethan style, was neither a popular nor a critical success. His next two projects also testify to his love of Elizabethan literature. In 1807, he and Mary collaborated on *Tales from Shakespeare*, a prose version of William Shakespeare's plays intended for children. The *Tales* were generally well received, and the Lambs were commended for expanding the scope of children's literature in England, though a few critics regarded the *Tales* as distorted renderings of the plays. That same year, Lamb completed his *Specimens*

*of English Dramatic Poets, Who Lived About the Time of Shakespeare*, an anthology that included selections from the plays of such Elizabethan dramatists as Christopher Marlowe, John Webster, George Chapman, and Thomas Middleton. Since many of these works were previously unavailable to readers, Lamb's anthology was an important reference source.

**Unexpected Success as an Essayist** In 1820, the editor of the *London Magazine* invited Lamb to contribute regularly to the periodical. Lamb, eager to supplement his meager income, wrote some pieces under the pseudonym of "Elia" for the magazine. With the overwhelming success of these essays, Lamb became one of the most admired men in London. He and Mary presided over a weekly open house attended by his many literary friends, including Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and Henry Crabb Robinson.

Besides his diverse friendships, Lamb found his chief pleasure in writing, which consumed his evenings and holidays. After his retirement from the East India Company, he devoted more time to his favorite occupation. Charles "Elia" Lamb was still at the peak of his popularity as an essayist when he died suddenly from an infection in 1834.

### Works in Literary Context

Lamb's virtually ignored dramas were inspired by his affinity for the theater. His short experimental writing, such as the novel *Rosamund Gray* (1798) displays the influence of Henry Mackenzie and Laurence Sterne. His criticism and "Elia" works are similar in language to the writings of Sir Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, though Lamb made them his own. He claimed that he read mainly works from the past, though the assertion was not strictly true. He celebrated the "quiddities" of his favorite little-known books, the theater, childhood and youth, the daily round, the daily grind, and most particularly the surprising qualities of some of his friends, for nearly all of his observations are drawn—or transmuted—from life.

**Literary Criticism and Whimsically Personal Essays** In his essays of literary criticism, such as in *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets* (1807), Lamb supplements each author's entry with explanatory notes that are now considered his most important critical work. Lamb further elaborated on his views in such essays as "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Presentation." There, he argues that the best qualities of Shakespeare's plays can be fully appreciated only through reading; according to Lamb, stage performances often diminish the play's meaning, and individual performers often misinterpret Shakespeare's intended characterizations. Besides his dramatic criticism, Lamb composed sketches in the familiar essay form, a style popularized by Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, Robert Burton, and Sir Thomas

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lamb's famous contemporaries include:

**Jane Austen** (1775–1817): British novelist "of manners" who is still read today and appreciated for her realism and brilliant wit.

**Simón Bolívar** (1783–1830): A Venezuela-born resistance leader who was instrumental in Hispanic America's liberation from Spain, and in founding the Spanish colonies of Gran Columbia.

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge** (1772–1834): A British poet, philosopher, and critic who is widely recognized as one of the founders of the Romantic movement.

**Francis Scott Key** (1779–1843): An American lawyer and author, composer of the U.S. national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

**William Wordsworth** (1770–1850): A British poet perhaps best known, along with Coleridge, as the cofounder of the Romantic movement in Europe.

Browne. These pieces are characterized by a personal tone, narrative ease, and a wealth of literary allusions or references.

When Lamb's *Elia: Essays Which Have Appeared under That Signature in the "London Magazine"* was published in 1823, he was already one of the most popular writers in England, but the "Elia" essays enjoyed unparalleled success. Critics were enchanted with Lamb's highly wrought style and his blending of humor and grief. Never preachy, the essays treat ordinary subjects in a nostalgic, fanciful way, and one of their chief attractions for readers of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the gradual revelation of the author's personality.

**Writing for Antiquity, but Influential Among Contemporaries** Lamb's style is sometimes almost too rich in its seventeenth-century speech patterning. After one of his early literary rejections Lamb declared, "Damn the age; I will write for Antiquity!" This tendency has sometimes been found too quaint, with its "peradventures," "marrys," and "hath" or "seemeths." The many classical allusions are also often lost on the modern reader. But Lamb's sense is most often clear; his form is brief, subtle, compact, and alive with wry and witty observations on the human condition—mostly on daily, specific, minutiae as they occur to him. Lamb is a true Romantic in his rejection of abstraction, rhetorical rules, and broad philosophic systems.

Lamb was among the first to appreciate Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and the works of John Clare and William Blake,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A key component of Lamb's oeuvre is his selection of works about the style and content of pieces by other writers. Here are a few works by authors who also wrote important essays of literary criticism:

*Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), a survey of the field by Northrop Frye. In this book, the critic reviews the principles and techniques of literary criticism.

*Biographia Literaria* (1817), a collection of essays by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In this set of autobiographical writings, Coleridge includes pieces on literary criticism and explains his now famous theory of the suspension of disbelief.

*The Sacred Wood* (1920), critical essays by T. S. Eliot. In this work, Eliot critiques drama and poetry, including that of Dante, William Blake, and William Shakespeare.

*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (1981), a collection of essays by Mikhail Bakhtin. In this complex study set, Bakhtin closely examines such genres as parody, romance, and the picaresque.

including Blake's paintings. His criticism, mainly in letters, of the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth was sometimes heeded by those poets. John Keats was captivated by Lamb's comments on Shakespeare. Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray were both influenced by Lamb's character studies. And the Brontës, Robert Browning, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf praised him. In a letter to Clive Bell in 1908 Woolf wrote, "I had no notion what an exquisite writer Lamb is.... God knows how I shall have the courage to dip my pen tomorrow."

### Works in Critical Context

Though he initially achieved prominence as a drama critic, Lamb's greatest fame came through his "Elia" essays, written between 1820 and 1825.

***A Disputed Critical Legacy*** Lamb's importance as a critic has been much debated. Some scholars, most recently René Wellek, have commented on his literary prejudices and his lack of consistent critical methodology. Lamb's thesis in "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare" is considered especially controversial. Because Lamb theorized that Shakespeare's works were best unperformed, such critics as T. S. Eliot held Lamb personally responsible for what Eliot termed "the detrimental distinction" between drama and literature in the English language. Conversely, such diverse critics as Henry Nelson Coleridge, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and E. M. W. Tillyard have asserted Lamb's historical

importance and hailed his *Specimens* in particular as a critical landmark.

***The "Elia" Essays (1820–1825)*** No such controversy surrounds the "Elia" essays, which have been almost universally praised by reviewers since their initial appearance. Although some scholars considered Lamb's style imitative of earlier English writers, the majority now accept that quality as one of the author's distinctive hallmarks, along with his fondness for the obscure and other idiosyncrasies. Stylistic studies by Walter Pater, Arthur Symons, A. G. van Kranendonk, and Donald H. Reiman explore diverse aspects of Lamb's essay-writing artistry. Both early and recent critics, including Thomas De Quincey, Bertram Jessup, and Gerald Monsman, have probed the "Elia" persona—proving that readers' curiosity about Lamb's personality has not waned.

In one of the more recent studies of Lamb, Monsman has written that the creation of "Elia" was an "exorcism" of Lamb's troubled family's past. And while most critics acknowledge Lamb's contribution to the rediscovery of Elizabethan drama in nineteenth-century England, his reputation rests on the "Elia" essays, whose humor and spontaneity continue to capture the imaginations of modern readers.

### Responses to Literature

1. Lamb is famous for arguing that Shakespeare's plays are more successful as literature than when presented on stage, where actors draw attention away from the author's words and may even misinterpret them. Others argue that to read Shakespeare's plays as prose is to deny their very purpose as staged works. With whom do you side, and why? Do you agree with some of the points each side makes? If so, which ones and why?
2. Lamb once spent six weeks "very agreeably in a madhouse"—a fact he reported to Coleridge in the first of his letters to survive. Scholars attribute the breakdown to a number of possible causes. Research the different theories offered to explain Lamb's breakdown. In your opinion, which one best fits the facts you know about Lamb? What evidence do you find for or against this in his artistic production?
3. Though he waged a lifelong battle with depression, Lamb was never again to suffer a complete breakdown. Many critics have suggested that Lamb's writing, his whimsy, his humor, and the strong expression of feeling so often discernible in his work kept him going. Consider Lamb's writing, and the craft of writing in general: How would writing help to preserve one's sanity? What benefit do you find in writing? What disadvantages might there be to creative writing as therapy?

4. *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets* and other Lamb works were read far into the nineteenth century and admired by both generations of Romantics. In both style and content they depicted the intellectual preferences and favored themes of Romantic society. Considering such works, how would you characterize their first readers? What can you deduce about nineteenth-century tastes, values, desires? What was important to Romantic era men and women?

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## Philip Larkin

BORN: 1922, Coventry, Warwickshire, England

DIED: 1985, Hull, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The North Ship* (1945)

*XX Poems* (1951)

*The Less Deceived* (1955)

*The Whitsun Weddings* (1964)

*High Windows* (1974)

#### Overview

A major poet of the post-World War II era, Larkin was an eminent member of the group of English writers known as the Movement. Writers associated with the Movement wrote fiction and poetry about ordinary experience in a realistic and rational style, consciously avoiding the idealistic principles of Romanticism and the experimental methods of modernism.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Came of Age during World War II** Larkin was born in 1922, in Coventry, England, to Sydney and Eva Emily Day Larkin. While attending the King Henry VIII School, he began to write poetry, regularly contributing to the school magazine. In 1940, he began his undergraduate studies at Oxford, where he developed close friendships with such writers as Kingsley Amis and John Wain. During this time, he continued to develop his poetic style, writing for student literary magazines and anthologies. After taking his degree in English, Larkin accepted a job as a librarian at the Wellington Public Library in Wellington, England.



Philip Larkin Larkin, Philip, photograph. Daily Express / Hulton Archive / Getty Images

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Larkin's famous contemporaries include:

- Dylan Thomas** (1914–1953): Welsh poet well known for his life of excess and his iconoclastic literary style. His poetry collections include *18 Poems* (1934).
- Jack Kerouac** (1922–1969): Influential American poet and novelist who was part of the Beat generation. His novels include *On the Road* (1957).
- Charles Mingus** (1922–1979): American jazz musician and bandleader considered one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. His albums include *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (1956).
- Helen Gurley Brown** (1922–): American author and publisher best known for editing *Cosmopolitan* magazine for more than thirty years.
- Paddy Chayefsky** (1923–1981): Three-time Academy Award-winning screenplay writer who also wrote for the stage and television. His screenplays include *The Americanization of Emily* (1964).
- Elizabeth II** (1926–): Queen of England since 1952.
- Ted Hughes** (1930–1998): English poet and children's writer who was the British poet laureate from 1984 until his death. His poetry collections include *Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Crow* (1970).

At this time, England was a major participant in World War II. One of the primary causes of the war was the rise and territorial ambitions of Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler. In the late 1930s, the government of British prime minister Neville Chamberlain sought to avoid war by appeasing Germany and allowing Germany's annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia. After Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland in 1939, Britain realized appeasement would not work and declared war on Germany. Winston Churchill soon replaced Chamberlain as prime minister. While Britain and its allies (France, the United States, and Russia) were victorious at the war's end in 1945, the country had been massively destroyed by German air attacks. More than nine hundred thousand civilian and military deaths came in Britain as a result of the war.

**Published First Works** Larkin published his first volume of poetry, *The North Ship*, in 1945, while working as a librarian. In the next few years, he published his only two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), the latter receiving modest critical acclaim. Larkin seems to have been in conflict over his main writing outlet—should it be fiction or poetry? As Larkin was choosing between literary forms, he took on a new post as a librarian at the University College Library in Leicester in 1946 and remained there until 1950. Larkin then

moved to Northern Ireland to become a sublibrarian at the Queen's University Library in Belfast, where he would work until 1955.

In the postwar period, British society was also evolving. A Labour government was elected after the end of World War II that pledged to carry out a full program of social welfare from birth to death as well as nationalization of industry. This program was not fully completed, though medicine was socialized, other social services were expanded, and several industries were put under public ownership. Conservatives were put in power in 1951 and halted many reforms.

**Lauded Poet** Deciding to focus on poetry, Larkin published *XX Poems* (1951) at his own expense. Although this collection received very little critical notice, critics believed that it was significant to his growth as a poet as he began developing his own distinctive poetic voice. *XX Poems* was followed by an international success, the volume titled *The Less Deceived* (1955), which appeared a few years later. It was critically lauded.

Larkin returned to England in 1955 to take a position as a librarian at the Byrmore Jones Library at the University of Hull. Being a librarian allowed Larkin to combine academia and administration, and he definitely preferred it to the alternatives of teaching or giving readings, the usual ways by which poets are forced to earn their livings. While working at Hull, Larkin continued to produce significant works of poetry. *The Whitsun Weddings*, another collection of poems, appeared in 1964. In one poem in the collection, "Send No Money," Larkin describes himself as an observer, not an active participant in life.

**Confessional, Observational Poems** Acute, witty observation is a hallmark of Larkin's later volume of poetry, *High Windows* (1974). The personal, reticently confessional voice is ever-present, particularly in the aftermath of a generation of sexual revolution in the 1960s, as seen here in "Annus Mirabilis": "Sexual intercourse began/ . . . (Though just too late for me)/Between the end of the Chatterley ban/And the Beatles' first LP." But the deep-seated pessimism is almost always redeemed and transmuted by Larkin's wit, as illustrated in "This Be the Verse": "Man hands on misery to man./It deepens like a coastal shelf./Get out as early as you can,/And don't have any kids yourself."

**Importance Recognized** The years following *The Whitsun Weddings* saw Larkin repeatedly honored as probably the principal living British poet. The BBC feted him with a special "Larkin at 50" broadcast in 1972, and he was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973). Larkin's next poetry collection appeared in 1974, *High Windows*.

Between the publication of *High Windows* and his death from throat cancer in December 1985, he wrote practically no new poems and often complained of the muse having abandoned him. Indeed, his last book

published in his lifetime, *Required Writing* (1983), is a collection of prose pieces written between 1955 and 1982. His final literary triumph came posthumously with the publication of his *Collected Poems* (1988), which won a critical acclaim and commercial success in England and the United States rarely enjoyed by a book of poetry.

### Works in Literary Context

Larkin's earliest poems, written mostly during the 1930s, reflect the influence of W. H. Auden and W. B. Yeats, though he was also influenced by D. H. Lawrence, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. Yeats's influence has been noted particularly in the metaphorical language and lush imagery of the lyrics in Larkin's first volume, *The North Ship*. Larkin asserted that his reading of Thomas Hardy's verse inspired him to write with greater austerity and to link experiences and emotions with detailed settings. This breakthrough into a "mature" style, as Larkin termed it, is exemplified in what critics refer to as "the Larkin line"—a taut pentameter in which various emotional effects are achieved through the use of common language, subtle rhymes, compound adjectives, and concrete images.

**Life-Reflecting Themes** Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry—rhyme, stanza, and meter—to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying experiences thrust upon common people in the modern age. He frequently focused on death and the bleakness of contemporary existence, exposing sham and hypocrisy in human behavior, religion, and urban values, and consistently expressing pessimism and futility about human endeavors. Other recurring themes in Larkin's work include solitude versus community and marriage.

Such themes are examined in *The Less Deceived*, for example. The title of the collection reflects Larkin's insistence on the need for exposing and overcoming illusions and false ideals. "Going," usually considered the first of his mature poems, and "Aubade," one of Larkin's greatest works, both present unequivocal statements of his fear of death. Some of Larkin's marriage poems are celebratory, while others discuss the hardships and compromises of matrimony or, as in "Dockery and Son," address the circumstances of the poet's bachelorhood and his singular devotion to his art.

### Works in Critical Context

In a time when popular reception of poetry was perhaps more tenuous than in any period since the Wordsworthian revolution, Larkin managed to capture a loyal, wide, and growing audience of readers. He has been acclaimed the "unofficial poet laureate" of England and the "laureate of the common man," as a representative spokesman for the British sensibility since World War II. He emerged as the center, if not the starting point, of most critical debate over postwar British verse.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One of the recurring themes in Larkin's poetry, particularly in later years, is the prospect and inevitability of aging and death. Here are some other poems that include this theme:

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (1951), a poem by Dylan Thomas. This widely quoted poem was written about the author's dying father.

"The Dance of Death" (1857), a poem by Charles Baudelaire. This poem uses florid metaphorical language to discuss the approach and effect of death.

"On Hearing of a Death" (1907), poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. This poem presents thoughts that arrive upon learning of someone else's death.

The revelations of Larkin's *Selected Letters*, published in 1992, and of his biography on Andrew Motion that appeared the next year, caused a considerable stir and, at least initially, damaged Larkin's reputation as a poet. Such hostility was a reaction chiefly to his racist remarks in letters and conversations and to his seemingly heartless and deceitful treatment of women who loved him. As a result, passages and even entire poems that earlier had appeared mildly sexist now were interpreted as being outrightly misogynist, and previously admiring critics were hard-pressed to defend many elements of his private life.

Even so, the debate among readers and critics soon turned to whether the value of at least Larkin's best poetry really turned on such matters. If many of his admirers were saddened by the revelations, and if certain critics who had never liked Larkin's work felt vindicated by them, in general the initial shock gave way to a broader discussion of the relationship between literary biography and literary value and, in Larkin's case, to a renewed acknowledgment of his preeminent position among postwar British poets.

***The Less Deceived*** *The Less Deceived*, Larkin's second collection of poems, contains two of his most admired poems, "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" and "Church Going." Both are personal monologues, musing nostalgically on the poet's favorite theme: loss—of time, of the certainty of religious belief; for, as Larkin wrote elsewhere (commenting on imaginative literature in general), "Happiness writes white." Writing about the pieces included in the collection, the American poet-critic Robert Lowell noted, "It's a homely, sophisticated language that mixes description with a personal voice. No post-war poetry has so captured the moment, and captured it without straining after ephemera."

## Responses to Literature

1. Larkin was a prominent member of the Movement, which scorned the literary modernism of such poets as Dylan Thomas, favoring anti-Romanticism, rationality, and sobriety. Read a few poems by Larkin and Thomas. Write an essay discussing the thematic similarities and differences you find in these works. Does Larkin's poetry fully conform to the tenets of the Movement? Why or why not?
2. Much of Larkin's poetry was reevaluated in light of certain biographical revelations after his death. Write an informal essay discussing whether you think the biography of a poet should influence how we read his or her works. Does studying the life of a poet help us better understand the literary value of the poet's works, or does it cloud the reader's ability to experience the poetry in its own right?
3. After reading a selection of Larkin's poems, write brief character sketches of some of Larkin's urban characters, describing the way they think and how their actions relate to their ideas.
4. The prospect and inevitability of aging and death was a recurring theme in Larkin's work. Write a poem about aging or death that expresses your current perspective on these topics.

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## ■ D. H. Lawrence

BORN: 1885, Eastwood, England

DIED: 1930, Venice, France

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Novels, poetry, essays, plays

MAJOR WORKS:

*Sons and Lovers* (1913)

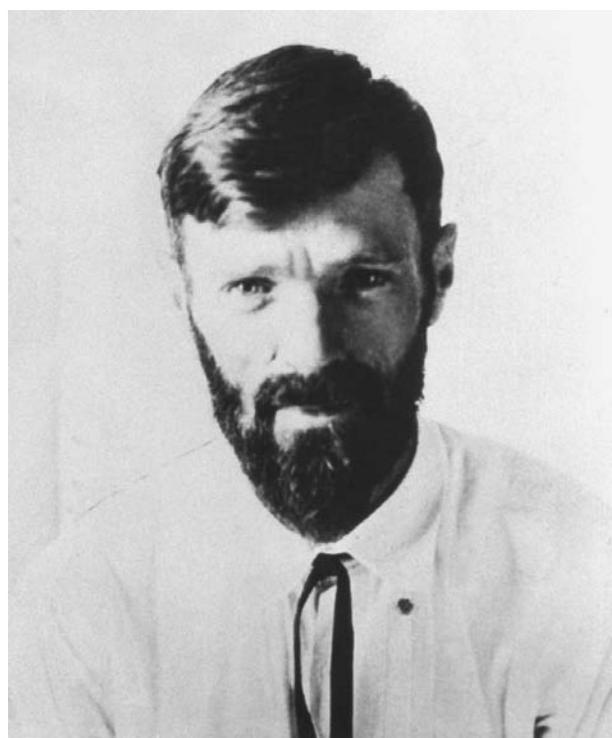
*The Rainbow* (1915)

*Women in Love* (1920)

*Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928)

## Overview

David Herbert Lawrence, most widely known as D. H. Lawrence, is one of the most controversial English writers of the twentieth century: His works were praised and condemned, his novels censored and banned, and his paintings seized by the authorities. During World War I he was suspected of being an enemy spy, partly because of



D. H. Lawrence *Lawrence, D. H., photograph*. AP Images.

his marriage to a German woman, and their movements were restricted until well after the war. Yet he has had a profound influence on the course of literature. His novels, especially *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), have provided test cases in the battle over literary censorship.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Estrangement and Inspiration** Born in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire, England, on September 11, 1885, Lawrence was the son of a little-educated coal miner and a mother of middle-class origins. His mother fought with his father, rejecting his limited way of life so that the children might escape it or, as Lawrence once put it, "rise in the world." Their quarrels and estrangement, and the consequent damage to the children, would become the subject of perhaps his most famous novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913).

Lawrence entered Nottingham University College in 1906 with the intention of becoming a teacher. During his second year at college in 1907, he submitted three stories in a Christmas competition to the *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, which offered a prize of three pounds for stories in each of three categories. Since the rules limited each competitor to one entry, he submitted two of the stories under the names of Jessie Chambers and Louie Burrows, friends and fellow pupils, with their permission. The story entered under Jessie Chambers's name won one of the prizes. This story was the first by Lawrence to appear in print.

After completing his university course in June 1908, Lawrence got a job at the newly opened Davidson Road School at Croydon, where he remained until 1912. Here he taught with some success, although without great enjoyment. He sent parts of a novel in progress, as well as some poems, to the great friend of his youth, Jessie Chambers, who sent them on to the *English Review*. Its editor, Ford Madox Ford, hailed him at once as a find, and Lawrence began his writing career.

**Love and Suspicion** Lawrence's constant struggle for a right relationship with women came to a climax in his encounter, liaison, and marriage with Frieda von Richthofen Weekley. They met in 1912 and were married in 1914; their evolving relationship is reflected in all his work after *Sons and Lovers*. The fulfillment it meant to him can be seen most directly and poignantly in the volume of poems *Look! We Have Come Through!* (1917). Like *Sons and Lovers*, Lawrence's follow-up novels, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), are set in England and reflect Lawrence's deep concern with the male-female relationship.

Beginning with the assassination of Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, the countries of Europe

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lawrence's famous contemporaries include:

**Sir Winston Churchill** (1874–1965): Twice prime minister of the United Kingdom, this statesman and acclaimed orator was also a Nobel Prize-winning author.

**W. Somerset Maugham** (1874–1965): A prolific author adept at storytelling through his popular novels, stories, and plays.

**Amedeo Clemente Modigliani** (1884–1920): Italian painter and sculptor who pursued his career for the most part in France. Influenced by a range of genres, art movements, and primitive art, Modigliani's work was unique and idiosyncratic.

**Gertrude Stein** (1874–1946): American writer who spent most of her life in France. Stein is best known for her role as a catalyst in the development of modern art and literature.

**Leon Trotsky** (1879–1940): Ukrainian-born Bolshevik revolutionary and Marxist theorist. One of the first members of the politburo, Trotsky was one of the leaders of the Russian October Revolution.

became divided, with Germany on one side and the Allied Powers—France, Russia, and the United Kingdom—on the other in an attempt to establish control over the region. Because of his wife's German heritage and his questionable morals in the eyes of the British government—his novel *The Rainbow* had already been banned for obscenity—Lawrence was suspected of being a spy for the Germans. He was persecuted throughout the war, and even required to move inland when it was suspected that he was signaling to submarines from his coastal home.

**Displaced** The Lawrences lived in many parts of the world—particularly in Italy, Australia, Mexico, and New Mexico. Embittered by the censorship of his work and the suspicion regarding his German-born wife during the war, Lawrence sought a promising place where his friends and he might form a colony based on individuality and talent rather than possessions. This he never realized for more than brief periods. There were quarrels and desertions, and his precarious health was a factor in the constant moves. He wistfully regarded himself as lacking in the societal self, something he felt to the day he died, March 2, 1930, in Venice, France.

Lawrence's work from the war onward traces his search for that societal self. Most of these works, such as *Kangaroo* (1923) and *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), reflect his fascination with the places in which he wrote. Toward the last, his imagination returned to his English origins

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One of the major themes found in Lawrence's work is the relationship between men and women.

Here are a few works by writers who have also explored the theme:

*The Fountainhead* (1943), by Ayn Rand. An epic novel, it explores profound themes, among them artistic integrity, autonomy, and love between powerful men and women.

*Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a novel by Jane Austen. A timeless classic, it makes light of the seriousness of nineteenth-century courtship, love, and romance.

*Women Without Men* (1989), a novel by Shahrnush Paripour. Upon its publication, the author of this allegory of life for contemporary women was jailed for her frank and defiant portrayal of female sexuality. The book is still banned in Iran.

for the scene and characters of his most notorious and controversial novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). All through his career, Lawrence's boldness in treating the sexual side of his characters' relationships had aroused the censorious. But in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, his last full-length novel, Lawrence went much further. The book was banned in England, and this was followed by the seizure of the manuscript of his poems *Pansies* and the closing of an exhibition of his paintings.

### Works in Literary Context

In the decades following his death in 1930 from tuberculosis, Lawrence's reputation grew until his works have come to stand among the classics of twentieth-century literature. He produced nearly fifty volumes of novels, stories, plays, and essays, and an enormous number of personal letters to a vast number of friends, including some of the most important and influential writers, critics, philosophers, and patrons of the arts of the early twentieth century. He took as his major theme the relationship between men and women, which he regarded as disastrously wrong in his time, but he also had a special gift for portraying what he called the spirit of place. Landscape is an essential character in his narratives, but often it is more a spiritual than a physical landscape.

**Range of Work** Lawrence used all of the literary forms successfully, except perhaps for drama. He wrote notable short stories throughout his career, including "Odour of Chrysanthemums" and "The Rocking Horse Winner." He proved himself a master of the short novel (novelette) form in *The Fox* and *The Virgin and the Gipsy*. His poetry ranges from early rhymed poems in *Love*

*Poems and Others* (1913) through the highly experimental and free forms of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, and on to the deliberately crude satire of much of *Pansies* (1929) and *Nettles* (1930). Among travel books, a more casual, less structured Lawrence is shown in *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), and *Etruscan Places* (1932). The short journalistic pieces collected in his *Assorted Articles* (1930) are witty and challenging.

**Continued Interest** Interest in Lawrence has come to surpass that of contemporaries who were more favored by birth and education. His work does not seem to become dated. After relative neglect following his death, his books came back into print, and he is the subject of numerous memoirs, biographies, and critical studies. This is probably because so many of the problems he dealt with are increasingly urgent and because he explored them with an original force, commitment, and style that appeal especially to the young. When World War I broke out, he felt that it was then more important to find the grounds of faith in life itself and the means to a new integration of the individual and society. To this he added the question of the nature of a relationship between man and man that would have the same higher significance as that between man and woman. Religiously and ethically he can be described as a vitalist, one who finds a source and a guide—in a sense, God—in the "life force" itself as it was manifested in nature, untampered with by "mental attitudes." He was concerned with how this force might be restored to a proper balance in human behavior.

**Influences** In preparation for immigrating to America to form his ideal colony of like-minded individuals to be called "Rananim," Lawrence read several American authors, including Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, James Fenimore Cooper, and Edgar Allan Poe. In preparation for such novels as *Sons and Lovers*, although he denied intentional use, it seems clear he read Freudian theory—at least enough to find readers quickly identifying the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex throughout the work. Italy also influenced and informed a number of Lawrence's work. Referring to Italy, Jeffrey Meyers noted that "the sympathetic people, the traditional life, and especially the pagan, primitive element revitalized Lawrence and inspired his astonishing creative achievement.... Lawrence's discovery of Italy was also a discovery of himself."

His impressions of people in other countries also made their way into his depictions. Too often, however, these depictions, sexually explicit in many of Lawrence's books as well as paintings, inflamed contemporary public opinion and resulted in several notorious court cases on charges of obscenity and pornography.

### Works in Critical Context

Lawrence received a great deal of criticism for both his writing and his attitude. He believed the goal for society was to keep the sexes pure, not in the sterile sense but in

the sense of keeping women purely feminine and men purely masculine—because they were “dynamically different in everything.” Various contemporary writers have supported Lawrence’s beliefs. Writer Anaïs Nin thought Lawrence had a “complete realization of the feelings of women.” Writer and feminist Kate Millet labeled Lawrence “a counterrevolutionary sexual politician.” Other critics have argued that Lawrence was an androgynous artist attuned to the inner experience of both sexes. Contemporary Spanish novelist Ramon Sender said that Lawrence saw the world as if he were the first man.

*The Plumed Serpent* (1926) was poorly received by readers in England but better received by the American public and press. *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920, 1921) have been claimed to represent “a supreme creative achievement” by “the greatest kind of artist.” *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the subject of intense controversy for decades, was classified by critic F. R. Leavis as being among Lawrence’s “lesser novels” because of its “offenses against taste.”

While most of his works have elicited both negative and positive attention, *Sons and Lovers* stands out as being Lawrence’s most widely read and most widely reviewed novel.

**Sons and Lovers** An autobiographical account of his youth, *Sons and Lovers* involves what Lawrence referred to as “the battle between mother and the girl, with the son as object.” Some critics immediately regarded the novel as a brilliant illustration of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex. Others, such as one reviewer from the *Nation*, warned of “boredom” and found the plot “commonplace and decadent.” Still others, such as a *Manchester Guardian* contributor, judged the book “an achievement of the first quality.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Consider Paul’s feelings for Clara and Miriam in *Sons and Lovers* as they progress through the novel. Is it clear whether he is more devoted to one than the other? Why?
2. After reading *Sons and Lovers* make two lists: one of the feelings Paul has for Clara, one of the feelings Paul has for Miriam. How do the feelings contrast and make up the conflict of the novel?
3. *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* was banned for generations because it was deemed pornographic. How would you define “pornography”? Review legal definitions of the word, then discuss whether they apply to *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*.

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## Camara Laye

BORN: 1928, Kouroussa, French Guinea (now Guinea)

DIED: 1980, Dakar, Senegal

NATIONALITY: Guinean

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Dark Child* (1953)

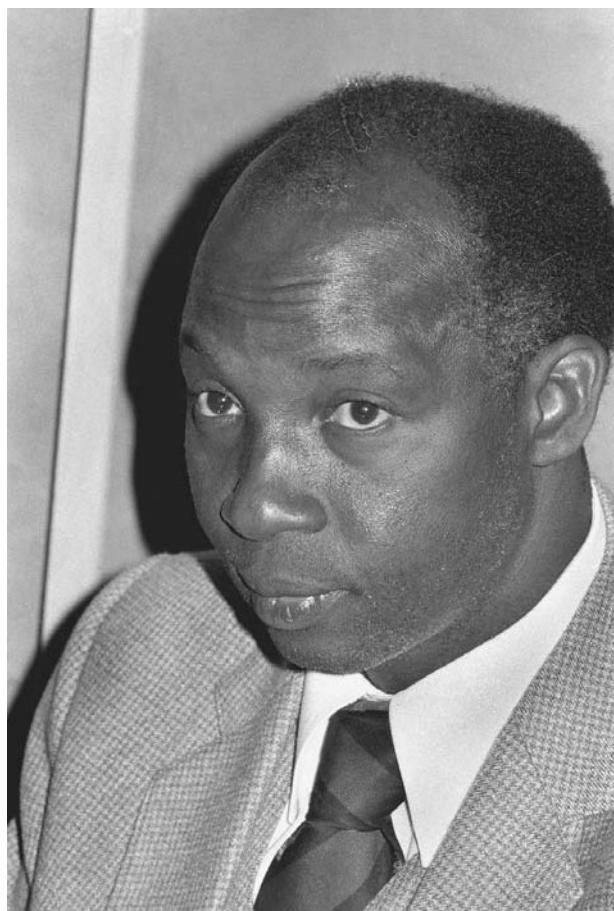
*The Radiance of the King* (1954)

*A Dream of Africa* (1966)

*The Guardian of the Word* (1978)

## Overview

Camara Laye has long been recognized as one of the most important French-speaking novelists of Africa. His books confront such modern dilemmas as social and psychological alienation and the search for identity. Laye was exiled from his home country of Guinea in 1966 because of his opposition to its government and was forced to live in Senegal until his death. As a result, much of his writing chronicles the plight of the exiled and the problems of adapting to change and cultural dislocation.



Camara Laye © Roger-Viollet / The Image Works

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Tensions and Loneliness in Student Life** Born in Guinea and raised a Muslim in that nation's countryside, Laye first encountered urban life when he left his tribal village to attend high school in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. In striking contrast to what he had experienced in his birthplace Kourossa, he found Conakry to be frankly modern: Twentieth-century technology was everywhere. The vast difference between the two societies startled Laye and made his life in the capital difficult. Upon graduating from high school, Laye accepted a scholarship to study engineering in Paris. He found the contrasts between African and European cultures even more overwhelming. To ease the tension and loneliness of his student life, Laye began to write remembrances of his childhood in the Guinean countryside. These writings became his first book, *The Dark Child*. Laye followed up this text with his masterpiece, *The Radiance of the King*, and even though this novel was a hit from the beginning, response to his next text, *A Dream of Africa* (1966), was even stronger.

**Exile in 1966** Laye's third book resulted in his forced exile from his homeland in 1966. *A Dream of Africa* comments openly on the dictatorial policies of Guinean leader Sékou Touré, who forced Laye to flee the country with his family. While Touré is criticized by many for failing to institute democracy in his country, he played a key role in liberating Guinea from colonial possession by France. Until the mid-twentieth century, France remained one of the largest imperial powers in the world, controlling numerous territories, many of which, like Guinea, were located in Africa. Laye was to live in neighboring Senegal, under the protection of Senegal's president Leopold Senghor, for the remainder of his life.

**Departure from Political Novels** In 1970, during a visit to Guinea to see her ailing father, Laye's wife was arrested and imprisoned as an enemy of the state. Because he feared for her safety, Laye never again published an overtly political work. He married a second wife during his wife's imprisonment (a custom in his culture), but when his first wife was released from prison in 1977, she would not accept her husband's new domestic situation and she divorced him.

Laye's next book did not appear until 1978 when, after teaching in Senegal for many years, he completed *The Guardian of the Word*, his final publication. A marked departure from his earlier works, *The Guardian of the Word* is an epic novel set in thirteenth-century West Africa about the life of Soundiata (also known as Sunjata), the legendary leader of the Mali empire. The novel is based on an oral account of the period popular among Guinean storytellers, or *griots*. Laye first heard the story from Babu Conde, one of the best-known of Guinea's griots. Because the novel focuses in part on the conduct of Mali's first emperor and the standards of behavior he set, it indirectly comments on the proper conduct of all governments, something Laye could not afford to do openly. With *The Guardian of the Word*, Laye drew praise not only for preserving and celebrating a fragment of African culture, but also for bringing to it his own creative force. Laye spent his last days in Dakar, Senegal where he died of a kidney infection in 1980.

## Works in Literary Context

All of Laye's books are written according to predominantly European literary modes, yet they paradoxically affirm traditional African life and culture. He succeeds in combining these discordant elements into a satisfying whole that expresses his individual vision. Speaking of *The Radiance of the King* in particular, Neil McEwan explained that "Laye is an artist in whom sources are entirely absorbed and the question whether this novel is French literature or African seems pointless; it is Camara Laye's." King noted that Laye transcended his cultural background, concluding that his work "belongs within the tradition of classic world literature, describing a personal and cultural dilemma in accents that speak to all

mankind." Indeed, critical interpretation of *The Radiance of the King* alone illustrates the disparate ways in which one can understand Laye's influences and style.

**"Stranger in a Strange Town"** *The Radiance of the King* is widely considered Laye's finest work. Under one interpretation, this novel is rooted in the "stranger in a strange town" tradition of literature, in which a person about whom little is known enters a town and shakes things up—challenging cultural and political assumptions the town holds. In this tradition are novels like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. *The Radiance of the King* centers on a white man alone in an African village. The story takes a white European named Clarence into the African countryside, where he is forced to adapt to the traditional culture in order to survive. He has no chance to earn a living unless he can find his way to the king's court and gain a position there. His search for the king forms the basis of the plot. "Clarence's search for the king with whom he hopes to hold an audience," wrote Jeannette Macauley, "becomes an obsession. It's the mirage which lures him on through dark forests with people he doesn't feel anything for, with people who do not understand him."

**Possible Alternative Interpretations of *The Radiance of the King*** "Attempts have been made," Neil McEwan reported in his *Africa and the Novel*, "to prove Kafka's 'influence' on the novel: 'an African Kafka' can be praise from some European critics, disparagement from some Africans." But McEwan believed that *The Radiance of the King* ultimately suggests "innumerable European writers" and proposed that "symbolist, allegorical, mythic, archetypal, psychological, and comparative-cultural studies seem called for; indeed there are passages... in which one suspects that the author has deliberately provoked and mystified critical attention.... It mocks analysis."

Because of the ambiguous nature of Clarence's quest, the novel is not restricted to a single interpretation. As Larson stated in *The Emergence of African Fiction*, "Clarence, who is archetypal of Western man in particular, is symbolic of everyman and his difficulties in adjusting not only to a different culture, but to life itself." King explained that "the novel deals with the theme of any man trying to adjust to a strange society, of every man's homelessness in the world.... Making this ordinary European a symbol for Everyman is a way of countering 'black racism,' a way of showing that the essential human experiences go beyond colour." If Larson's interpretation is correct, then the novel can be seen as a part of the Existentialist tradition, emphasizing the homelessness and helplessness of human beings but also suggesting the importance of attempting to come together, to make the best of the world, faulted though it may be.

### Works in Critical Context

Largely regarded with favor, Laye's most harsh criticism has always been for the political stances his texts seem to

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Laye's famous contemporaries include:

**Wallace Stegner** (1909–1993): The American novelist, short-story writer, historian, and environmentalist whose work often focuses on the American West.

**Elie Wiesel** (1928–): The Romanian-born author who has written extensively about his experience as a Holocaust survivor.

**Italo Calvino** (1923–1985): The Italian novelist who wrote the acclaimed *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.

**Chinua Achebe** (1930–): The Nigerian novelist and author of *Things Fall Apart*, one of the most widely acclaimed novels in African literature.

**B. B. King** (1925–): The influential American blues guitarist.

take. Some critics of *The Dark Child* found its political message too muted, but Laye's third novel, overtly political, was enough to force him into exile. Laye's greatest success—indeed, his most highly praised text—remains *The Radiance of the King*. Although many have offered differing views of the meaning and tradition of this novel, few have criticized the quality of the writing.

***The Dark Child*** Tracing Laye's development from his tribal childhood, through his schooling in Guinea's capital, and to his college life in Paris, *The Dark Child* poses questions about the preservation of traditional ways of life in the face of technological progress. As Irele noted in an article for *West Africa*, Laye's autobiography presented "an image of a coherence and dignity which went with social arrangements and human intercourse in the self-contained African universe of his childhood."

Some black critics of the time faulted Laye for not speaking out against colonialism. They saw his concern with traditional African society as an irrelevancy in an age of struggle for African independence. But Gerald Moore pointed out in *Twelve African Writers* that the world of Laye's childhood was largely untouched by colonialism. "Though conquered and administered by France," Moore wrote, "a city like [Laye's native village] was complex and self-sufficient enough to go very much on its own immemorial way. Its people... were not constantly obsessed with the alien presence of Europe in their midst." In contrast to this view, Irele believed that because *The Dark Child* celebrated the traditional African ways of life, it was "in fact a form of denial of the assumptions and explicit ideological outgrowth of the French colonial enterprise."

Whatever the final judgment regarding the book's stance on colonialism, *The Dark Child* has been widely

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In *The Guardian of the Word*, Laye spins a tale about Soundiata, the legendary leader of the Mali empire. Here are a few examples of works that attempt to reimagine the myths surrounding legendary figures:

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), a collection of poems and short narratives by Michael Ondaatje. This work loosely describes both the myths and the realities of the life of Billy the Kid; the text ultimately suggests that the best thing about the myths that surround Billy the Kid is that they enable people to imagine themselves as the legendary gunslinger.

*Grendel* (1971), a novel by John Gardner. In this book, Gardner takes the classic epic poem *Beowulf* and changes the point of view, emphasizing the humanity and sadness of the "monster" whose slaying resulted in Beowulf's fame and fortune.

*First Knight* (1995), a film directed by Jerry Zucker. This movie offers Lancelot and Guinevere as an ideal match, negating the importance of legendary King Arthur.

praised for the quiet restraint of its prose. Moore explained that *The Dark Child* "is a unique book in many ways, written with a singular and gentle sincerity, yet with very conscious artistic skill. Laye does not proclaim his negritude or announce the coming dawn; he records what his childhood was, what was the quality and the depth of the life from which he sprang." In her study *The Writings of Camara Laye*, Adele King called *The Dark Child* "a carefully controlled story... presented with economy and restraint.... A particular moment in Laye's life and in the history of Africa has been transformed into a minor classic, in which the autobiographical form has been raised to the level of art." The book, Eric Sellin noted in *World Literature Today*, won Laye "instant acclaim and lasting respect as a stylist."

***The Radiance of the King*** Critical regard for *The Radiance of the King* has always been very favorable, with some commentators placing it among the very best of contemporary African literature. The book's "clever reversals, dreamlike evocations, surreal efforts and implementation in prose of techniques proper to film," Sellin remarked, "have caused some admirers to deem it the finest African novel."

Several critics found a religious symbolism in the novel, with David Cook in *Perspectives on African Literature* noting that "the book is, of course, cast in the form of a quest—a spiritual quest; though there is nothing pompous, ponderous or moralistic about it." Likewise, Janheinz Jahn in *Introduction to African Literature: An*

*Anthology of Critical Writings from "Black Orpheus,"* explained that *The Radiance of the King* "is usually considered as an ingenious allegory about man's search for God. But I think that the book cannot be seen in this sense only; it is ambivalent, even multivalent." If Cook's and Jahn's interpretations are correct, then the novel belongs to a tradition at least as old as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a spiritual allegory about the life a Christian must live in order to reach Heaven.

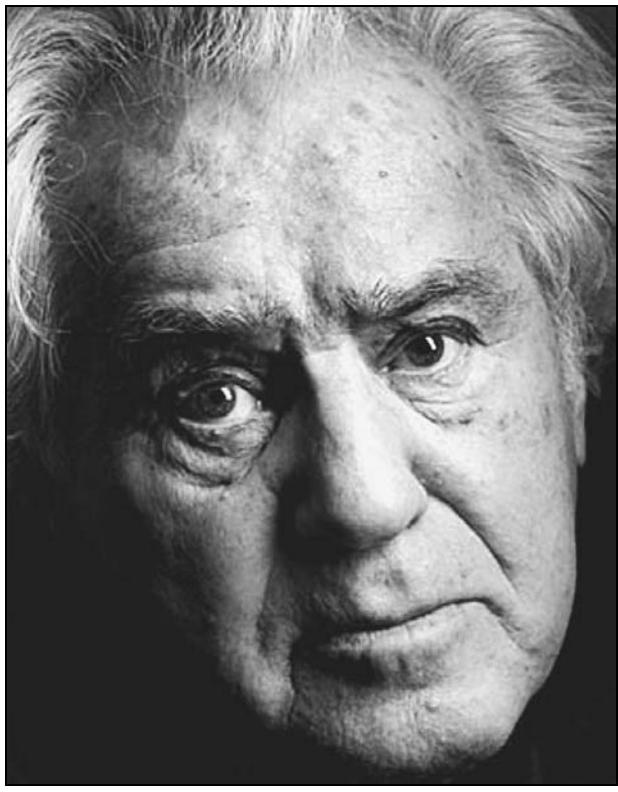
### Responses to Literature

1. Read *A Dream of Africa*. Laye was exiled because he wrote this book. What do you think Sékou Touré, of whom Laye was critical in *A Dream of Africa*, was trying to accomplish in exiling the writer? Given that Laye never wrote an overtly political work and stayed out of Guinea after he was exiled, do you think Touré achieved his goals? What do you make of this situation—of Laye's being silenced by Touré?
2. You have read the various interpretations of *The Radiance of the King*. Clearly, although critics agree that the novel is fantastic, they cannot agree on what it means. Now, read the novel. What do you think Laye is trying to say in this novel—about religion, race, the meaning of life, or whatever else you find in the text? Cite specific passages from the text to support your response.
3. In *The Guardian of the Word*, Laye uses the myth and legends surrounding an important figure in African history for fictional purposes. Pick a figure from history and write a story in which you attempt to rethink the legends and myths surrounding your chosen historical figure in a way that makes the legendary figure relevant for today. To see how to do this, read *The Guardian of the Word* and research the life of Soundiata to see how Laye changed portions of the known history of this figure for his own purposes.
4. In many ways, *The Radiance of the King* and other "stranger in a strange land" narratives emphasize the uniqueness of the cultures they describe—they offer a chance to see one's culture from the eyes of an outsider. Imagine you are trying to describe to a "stranger" the nuances of a cultural experience that is important to you—a wedding or a sporting event are good options. What would you have to explain to this person who has never heard of the wedding practices of your culture and has no idea what the rules of your culture's sports are? Write a story or an essay in which you describe the process of helping this person understand your culture.

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## Irving Layton

BORN: 1912, Neamtz, Romania

DIED: 2006, Montreal, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian, Romanian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959)

*The Covenant* (1977)

*Droppings from Heaven* (1979)

*The Gucci Bag* (1983)

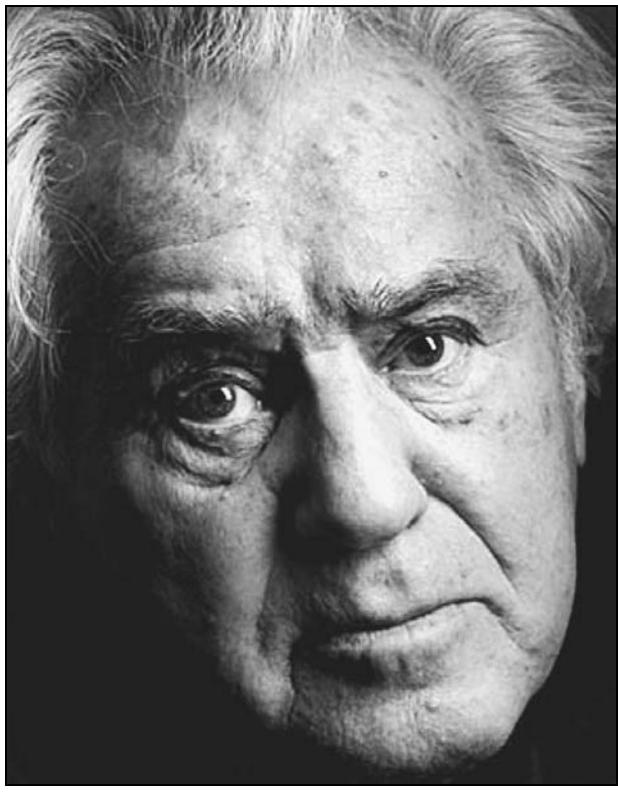
*The Love Poems of Irving Layton, with Reverence & Delight* (1984)

### Overview

A controversial and outspoken literary figure, Irving Layton is known for his energetic, passionate, and often angry verse, written in an attempt to “disturb the accumulated complacencies of people.” A prolific writer, Layton published nearly fifty volumes of poetry in as many years, many confronting what he viewed as sources of evil in the twentieth century. These “malignant forces,” he suggested, have contributed to moral and cultural decay in the modern world.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Visions of Canada** Layton was born Israel Pincu Lazarovitch in Neamtz, Romania, on March 12, 1912, to Jewish parents, Moishe (Moses) and Keine (Klara)



Irving Layton *Layton, Irving Peter*, photograph by John Reeves.  
Reproduced by permission.

Moscovitch Lazarovitch. He immigrated to Canada with his family at age one. His father was a religious man whom Layton has described as “a visionary, a scholar”; his mother supported the family by running a small grocery store.

Educated in agriculture and economics at MacDonald College, St. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, in 1939 Layton received a bachelor of science degree, a year after he met and married Faye Lynch. Layton began to publish poetry while lecturing at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal in the early 1940s, and in 1943 he finished service with the Canadian Army; enraged with Adolf Hitler’s devastation of Europe during the course of the Second World War (1939–1945), he had enlisted the previous year, and had done his service in Ontario, Canada. While living in Montreal in the early 1940s, Layton, along with Louis Dudek and John Sutherland, began editing *First Statement*, a local literary journal. Some of his earliest poems were published in this journal, which highlighted the work of young Canadian writers and emphasized the social and political aspects of Canadian life—very much, of course, including responses to the war.

**From Poetry to Politics, A Much-married Man** But life went on in Canada, and Layton taught at Herzlia High School in Montreal from 1945 until 1960. He also lectured part-time at Sir George Williams University

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Irving's famous contemporaries include:

**Allen Ginsberg** (1926–1997): An American poet most famous for his Beat poem "Howl," a harsh critique of materialism and modern culture.

**Benjamin Bloom** (1913–1999): An American educational psychologist, he was instrumental in mastery-learning theory, initiating what is now used the world over and known as Bloom's Taxonomy.

**Leonard Cohen** (1934–): Canadian singer, songwriter, and poet famous for his evocative lyrics and richly emotional voice; Cohen was a student of Layton's at Herzlia High School.

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960): An Algerian-French philosophical writer, he was the second-youngest Nobel Prize recipient—and, while associated with existentialism, actually rejected that term in favor of the more accurate "nihilism."

**Józef Garliński** (1913–2005): A Polish historian, he was known for his popular books on World War II, including such best sellers as *Fighting Auschwitz* (1974).

from 1949 to 1965, where he was later the poet-in-residence for four years—starting in 1965. Layton published his first volume of poetry, *Here and Now*, in 1945. In 1946 he completed a master's degree in economics and political science at McGill University; that same year, he was divorced from Lynch and married to Betty Sutherland, with whom he subsequently had a daughter and a son, Naomi and Max. Layton wrote sensitive lyric poems to both his children.

Layton's earliest volumes met with minimal success. *A Red Carpet for the Sun* (1959), which included some of his best-known poems from previous volumes, proved to be his first major success, earning him popular praise as well as the Governor General's Award for Poetry in 1960. At this time he became what Tom Marshall has called an "unusual phenomenon—a genuinely popular poet."

Distanced and then finally divorced from the increasingly religious Sutherland (with whom he nevertheless maintained a lifelong friendship), in 1961 Layton married writer Aviva Cantord. During these years, he also became a vocal anticommunist, and split with many of his friends on the left over his support for the Vietnam War. Although Canada had some citizens fighting in Vietnam as part of the U.S. armed forces there, its primary involvement was the provision of a safe haven for somewhere between thirty thousand and ninety thousand U.S. citizens avoiding the draft, a method of forced conscription into the military. Canada's practice of harboring so-called

"draft dodgers," many of whom were artists themselves, made Layton's support for the war particularly unpopular in his social circle.

Layton remained at York until his retirement in 1978, when he began to write full-time. In that year Layton, whose marriage to Cantor had been dissolved, married former student Harriet Bernstein, a publicist, and the family moved to Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Layton was divorced again in 1983. The divorce from Bernstein found expression in his next work, *The Guci Bag*, which is devoted in part to revealing Layton's grief over the break-up.

### *Full-Time Writing, Plus One More Marriage*

Layton remarried in 1984 and moved with his new wife, aspiring painter and poet Anna Pottier, to a middle-class neighborhood of Montreal. As T. Jacobs explains at University of Toronto Library's dedicated Layton pages, Irving had always "believed that his mother's presence protects and guides him, and so when he learned that Anna was born the day of his mother's death in 1959, he took it as a sign to commit to Anna, who became his fifth and last wife."

When he and Pottier divorced in 2000, Layton settled in at Maimonides in Montreal with lifelong friend Musia Schwartz—maintaining a more or less comfortable lifestyle, though marred by the onset of Alzheimer's until his death six years later. He continued to write, maintaining a consistent and confrontational style as much in his poetic works as in his public life. Throughout his lifetime, he had collected numerous prestigious honorary degrees and awards, including in 1976 the Order of Canada and, though the award ultimately went to Gabriel García Márquez, a nomination for the 1982 Nobel Prize in Literature.

### Works in Literary Context

**Multiple Influences** The dedication in *Dance with Desire: Love Poems* (1986) suggests the many possible influences on Layton's verse, including "Miss Benjamin—the Grade Six teacher who awakened my erotic impulses and inspired my first sensual poem." This dedication also introduces readers to the poet's sometimes flippant approach to his craft. In the preface to *The Laughing Rooster* (1964), Layton declared that the concern of the poet is to "change the world; at any rate, to bear witness that another beside the heartless, stupid, and soul-destroying one men have created is possible." This attitude underlies almost all that he has written. In his insistence that art be not simply "art for art's sake," but that it also says something about the world—that it be a political or sociocultural statement of sorts—Layton turns away from certain of his modernist predecessors, following instead in the footsteps of such poets as Percy Bysshe Shelley, who famously argued that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

**A Bold, or Arrogant, Approach to “Evil” in Society** During the 1960s, Layton’s meditations on the tragedy of a European culture destroyed by war, mass murder, and the failure of Christian humanism gave his poetry a very sharp focus: His foreword to *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* (1963) calls for a new role for the poet, no longer the explorer of “new areas of sensibility,” but the witness and judge of several hundred years of Western traditions that have been corroded.

**Suffering History, Though Not Without Pleasure** A clear thematic pattern emerges in Layton’s work over time. *The Pole Vault* (1974) successfully unites the themes of passion and politics. But it is the painful history of Europe that absorbs him, occasionally merged with the theme of sexuality, as in “An Old Nicoise Whore” from *Periods of the Moon* (1967). By the writing of *For My Neighbours in Hell* (1980) and *Europe and Other Bad News* (1981), he was elaborating on his signature themes: social injustice, the death of the spirit in an age of materialism, energetic irreverence, and the lingering glow of passion. *Europe and Other Bad News* stresses his major themes, observing with distress that the Holocaust, the primary moral and psychological event of the twentieth century, is still neglected by contemporary poets. And *The Gucci Bag* (1983), while dominated by love and conflict and demonstrating his powerful commitment to poetry in the face of crumbling personal relations, reaffirms Layton’s darkest beliefs about human society. He expresses in the foreword that “poetry exists to give relief to those dark sensual impulses that our over-mechanized civilization has all but snuffed out.” He responds to the “murderous times” of the present, nailing a Gucci bag to the outside wall of his house as a talisman against materialism and greed.

The difference between Layton’s earlier poems and those that follow *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler* is that he has become more conscious of a universal decay of values and morals. But, he argued, unlike contemporary fiction or drama, poetry remained innocent of man’s twentieth-century tragedies. The gravest error, Layton claimed, is that poets have forgotten that they are descended from prophets and have “swapped roles with entertainers and culture-peddlers.” For Layton, “the exceptionally heinous nature of twentieth-century evil” requires the poet’s total concentration—and he loudly and harshly accused the poets of his present age for failing to deal with this issue.

**The Marriage of Romance and Irony** Offset by an ironic point of view and often satiric tone, Layton’s romantic sense of self provides a refreshing, invigorating dimension to contemporary Canadian writing. One of the few Canadian poets to perceive poetry as performance, Layton thrives in the role of showman, and William Carlos Williams’s comment, in his introduction to Layton’s *The Improved Binoculars* (1956), indicates the equally exuberant reaction of readers: “When I first

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who did emphasize themes of social importance, as Layton insisted:

*Collected Later Poems* (2003), a poetry collection by Anthony Hecht. In this three-volume selection of poetry, Hecht’s depiction of his experiences as a World War II liberator—who witnessed the atrocities firsthand—take on intense focus and profound sentiment.

*Heart Mountain* (1989), a novel by Gretel Ehrlich. In this novel of epic range, the story focuses on the experiences of Japanese Americans interred in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, prison camp during World War II.

*A Theory of Justice* (1971), a social survey by John Rawls. In this nonfiction book, the author presents a philosophical argument for a right to justice that is so great not even the collective society can overpower, eclipse, or take it away.

*Sovereign Bones* (2007), a volume of poetry edited by Eric Gansworth. In this collection, contributing Native American authors write on the imperative of maintaining their ethnic identity in the face of centuries.

clapped eyes on the poems of Irving Layton . . . I let out a yell of joy.”

This freshness of style is demonstrated in such works as *Droppings from Heaven* (1979), poems also marked by lyrical word construction and witty phrasing. Layton’s rapturous style, blunt criticisms, and flaunting sensuality came to influence several younger poets, notably Leonard Cohen—who was an early student of Layton’s at Herzliah. Despite their objections to his egotism, Canadian poets have responded wholeheartedly to Layton’s spiritual energy and visionary force—found in the union of romantic ideas with an ironic point of view.

### Works in Critical Context

Outspoken and controversial for his poetic attacks on complacency, moral sterility, and Canadian indifference, Irving Layton rarely failed to receive attention. He strove to reassert the spiritual values of life in the tradition of William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Walt Whitman, and D. H. Lawrence. A 1962 “epigram,” included in *Taking Sides: The Collected Social and Political Writings* (1977), summarized his position: “One cannot love life as much as I do . . . without abominating the pompous fools, the frustrated busybodies, the money lusting acquisitive dull clods, and lobotomized ideologues who make it difficult to live joyously.”

**Irritation with the Attitude, Appreciation for the Poems** Because of or in spite of this attitude, Layton

has been received as a poet with verse ranging, as George Woodcock has written, “from the atrocious to the excellent.” While some praise Layton’s rambunctious style, others bristle at his pompous proclamations of self-worth. Critics agree only that Layton was a paradox: “each of his books both contradicts and affirms all that he has done before,” *Globe and Mail*’s reviewer Eli Mandel wrote in 1969. Yet according to A. J. M. Smith in the 1985 edition of *Contemporary Poets*, he was a stimulating, if uneven, writer who created some fifty or sixty poems that “must rank with the best lyrical and reflective poems of the mid-century in English.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Many critics discuss Layton as a romantic poet in the tradition of William Blake and Walt Whitman. Find a Layton poem and a Whitman poem that share common tendencies, and explore both those commonalities and points of divergence, considering how and, especially, why the poems are similar and different in these ways. Following are some possible similarities to find:
  - Each poet explores elemental passions;
  - Each poet exalts the individual—particularly the poet;
  - Each poet examines the relationship between the physical and the spiritual.
2. Constituting a significant portion of his body of work are Layton’s love lyrics. Sensual, erotic, and explicitly sexual, they are intended to shock a Puritanical society. Find and discuss examples, considering how effective the poet is in startling his readership. In what ways are his poems shocking?
3. At the University of Toronto’s Web site pages dedicated to Layton are several of the poet’s comments on his philosophy of writing. In your opinion, should all poets and other writers operate by these same philosophies? Why or why not? Do you think Layton has found success because readers agree that all writers should be like him or because there are so few other writers like him and he fills a special niche?

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## Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

BORN: 1814, Dublin, Ireland

DIED: 1873, Dublin, Ireland

NATIONALITY: Irish

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

- The House by the Churchyard* (1863)  
*Wylder’s Hand* (1864)  
*Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh* (1864)  
*Guy Deverell* (1865)  
*In a Glass Darkly* (1871)

## Overview

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu is a major figure among Victorian-era authors of gothic and supernatural fiction. Critics praise his short stories and novels for their evocative descriptions of physical settings, convincing use of supernatural elements, and insightful characterization. Scholars also observe that Le Fanu’s subtle examinations of the psychological life of his characters distinguish his works from those of earlier gothic writers.



Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu *Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan, photograph.*

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood in Phoenix Park: Duels, Military Pageantry, and Upper-Class Life** The son of Thomas Philip and Emma Dobbin Le Fanu, Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu was born in Dublin on August 28, 1814. His family belonged to the professional and upper classes and was related to several of the leading families in Dublin, including the Sheridans (Le Fanu's paternal grandmother was a sister of Richard Brinsley Sheridan). Le Fanu's father, a Church of Ireland clergyman, was appointed chaplain for the Royal Hibernian Military School in 1815; Joseph, along with his older sister Catherine Frances and his younger brother William, spent his early childhood in Phoenix Park, a large public park just northwest of Dublin that contained the school and the residences of British administrators. In 1815 the park, which still looks much the same today, was the site of duels, military pageantry, and upper-class life. On its edges were several villages, including Chapelizod, the setting for *The House by the Churchyard* (1863). The family stayed in residence at the school for eleven years.

**Financial Disaster in Rural Ireland** In 1823 the Reverend Le Fanu became rector of Abingdon in County Limerick, a post he held in absentia until 1826, when he received the deanery of Emly and brought his family to Abingdon to take up residence. The family now found itself in rural Ireland, in a tiny village in the heart of Irish poverty and political ferment. The Reverend Le Fanu had alienated the resident Catholic priest by his three-year absenteeism, and the priest turned the countryside against him. As a result the move, which was promising at first, became financially disastrous. Tithe income dropped to half what it should have been in the first year, and, when in 1831 the Tithe Wars began, the situation became even worse: Catholics refused to pay the required tithes (10 percent of various agricultural produce) to the established Protestant Anglican Church of Ireland, and the family went deeply into debt.

**Near-Death Experiences** The political situation was, at times, dangerous. As a young man, Le Fanu's younger brother, William, was nearly killed at least once, and Joseph absorbed what his biographer W. J. McCormack calls the "atmosphere of automatic, casual, and yet strangely intimate violence [that] pervaded rural Ireland" along with the acceptance of the supernatural, which was also widespread among Irish peasantry.

**The Dublin Evening Mail** In 1832 Le Fanu entered Trinity College, University of Dublin, then the only college at the only university in Ireland. After studying classics he graduated with honors in 1837 and began legal training in the Dublin Inns of Court. The publication of his short story "The Ghost and the Bonesetter" in the January 1838 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine* began his longterm interest in the periodical. By 1840 he had bought interest in two Dublin newspapers, the *Statesman* and the *Warder*. He married Susanna Bennett in 1843, and they had four children. The *Statesman* folded in 1846, but Le Fanu continued his association with the *Warder* until 1870.

**Withdrawal from the Public Eye** Both Le Fanu and his wife suffered from ill health, and Susanna died in 1858. After his wife's death, Le Fanu gradually became more and more reclusive, earning over the years the title "The Invisible Prince." In 1861 he became part owner and coeditor of the *Dublin Evening Mail*, which he edited it until he sold it in 1869. Most of his fiction appeared first in serial form in this magazine. From 1863 to his death in 1873 he wrote prolifically, mainly novels including *The House by the Churchyard* and *Wylder's Hand*. The last year of his life was extremely solitary; he refused to see even old friends. He died of a heart condition on February 7, 1873. His imposing home in Dublin, in which he lived for twenty years, was leased from his wife's kinsman John Bennett, to whom he was deeply in debt. At Le Fanu's death his children were forced to leave.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Le Fanu's famous contemporaries include:

**Mark Twain** (1835–1910): Born Samuel Clemens, Twain has been called the “father of American literature” by no less a figure than William Faulkner. His *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remains a perennial candidate for the greatest American novel ever written.

**Paul Verlaine** (1844–1896): A French Symbolist poet, Verlaine led the prototypical lifestyle of the dissipated *artiste*, most notably (and scandalously) abandoning his wife and son to run off with poet Arthur Rimbaud, with whom he had a tempestuous relationship, and eventually sinking into drug and alcohol addiction by the end of his life.

**Benito Juarez** (1806–1872): Five-term president of Mexico, Juarez (a Zapotec Indian) resisted French attempts to install a puppet emperor and led efforts to modernize the country, earning a place as perhaps the best-loved political figure in Mexican history.

**Charlotte Brontë** (1816–1855): The eldest of a trio of literary sisters, this British author wrote four novels in her lifetime, including the classic *Jane Eyre*.

**Legendary Death** Many writers about Le Fanu have mentioned a legend about his death, which is probably the embellishment of a minor incident. He complained, it is said, of frequent nightmares about an old house that was about to topple in on him. When Le Fanu died, his doctor looked into the terror-stricken eyes of the dead man and said, “I feared this. That house fell at last.” While this story has no known basis in fact, it creates an image of Le Fanu as a “ghost-story writer.”

### Works in Literary Context

Le Fanu was born in the late-Romantic period, and its interest in the dark and macabre, which found expression in the gothic novel, was the main stimulus to his literary imagination. Like many writers of the era, he was also influenced by Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins. All of Le Fanu’s novels depend on mystery, often murder. Only one of his novels does not contain a crime.

**Irish Life and History** The elements of Le Fanu’s life play significant roles in his fiction. In his early work Irish life and history are major themes. The violence and often the treachery that he saw around him in his adolescence are reflected in many of his characters and plots; and his own financial difficulties gave him sympathy with all those characters in his stories who are in debt. His legal experience taught him not only what constituted

evidence but also about lawyers and legal procedures. His experience with his neurotic wife undoubtedly contributed to his understanding of, and interest in, abnormal psychology.

**Vampires, Ghosts, and the Essence of Gothic** “Carmilla” is a vampire story, arguably the best in the English language. It is considered less drawn out than many others, and it does not concern itself overmuch with the outward appearances of vampirism—the sharp fangs, the blood. The terror of the tale is in its restraint, its ordinariness, yet it retains all the traditional familiar elements: The lonely castle in Styria, the innocent girl as victim, the nightmares, and the eventual destruction of the evil.

**The Gothic Novel** It is common to speak of Le Fanu as writing within the tradition of the gothic novel. Understandable as this comment is, it creates difficulties because gothic is not a term that can be adequately defined. Le Fanu certainly has common ground with the better exponents of the “gothic art” in his skill in the creation of atmosphere: landscape and buildings are endowed with an air of menace and of mystery. Yet within this apparatus of suspense there is very little reliance on the mechanics with which he creates his illusions. He rarely—and never in his best work—joins with the lesser luminaries of the art who depended heavily upon sliding panels, descending ceilings, and all the machinery that could occasionally dominate the story. M. R. James, one of the finest writers of ghost stories in the twentieth century and one who greeted Le Fanu as “the master of us all,” wrote that an important element in a successful ghost story is that it should not explain itself. The sense of mystery must remain at the end—not be explained away by any logical process. Le Fanu demonstrates this ideally. The footsteps which pursue Captain Barton in “The Watcher” are not in any sense explained, although they can be understood in the context of the apparition of Barton’s shipmate. The “small black monkey, pushing its face forward in mimicry to meet mine” which sat on the open Bible from which the Reverend Mr. Jennings was endeavoring to preach in “Green Tea” can only be explained as the embodiment of evil. To see here a connection between this personal apparition and *The Origin of Species*, as has been suggested, is to deny an important element in Le Fanu’s work: Evil is a reality in his writings, and has as much power to affect human lives as goodness. It is never clear precisely what is the origin of that evil, but there is no doubt that it exists and is an influence that cannot be ignored.

**Mystery Stories** Le Fanu’s purpose was different from Wilkie Collins’s or Arthur Conan Doyle’s. As Michael H. Begnal explains, both of these men wished to maintain “a distance . . . between the reader and the event,” and “we view crime and sin in a detached, deductive way as a puzzle which Sherlock Holmes may solve as an

intellectual exercise but not as something which affects him or us very much. It is this very detachment which Le Fanu tries to avoid in his work." Le Fanu wants his readers involved with his morally and psychologically ambivalent antagonists, who are studies of the individual who commits one crime and then has to live with the consequences. Such characters include Sir Jekyl Marlowe of *Guy Deverell* (1865), Mr. Dingwell of *The Tenants of Malory* (1867), and Walter Longcluse of *Checkmate*, all of whom are psychologically haunted. The operation of fate, through the confluence of coincidences that are completely rational except for their timing, is probably the greatest affirmation of the supernatural in Le Fanu's work—ironically enough for a man better known for his tales of the supernatural than for his mysteries. In a Le Fanu mystery the operation of an invisible providence forces the criminal into a position or place in which he betrays himself. Thus, Wylder's hand reappears at the precise time when Lake rides by; Silas leaves the door open when he should have shut it. In his interest in the criminal's psyche and in the awareness of a providence that insists "murder will out," Le Fanu has more in common with Fyodor Dostoyevsky than with Conan Doyle.

## Works in Critical Context

During his lifetime, Le Fanu's works were moderately successful, although they received scant critical attention. Le Fanu's novels contain elements of suspense in addition to engaging emotional and descriptive passages. Critics such as Elizabeth Bowen, Julian Symons, and W. J. McCormack agree that *Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh* (1864) is Le Fanu's finest novel. In his introduction to *Uncle Silas*, Frederick B. Shroyer called it "one of the most effective, gripping novels of terror . . . ever written." In addition, *The House by the Churchyard* (1863) and *Wylder's Hand* (1864) have also received acclaim.

**Modern Criticism** During the twentieth century the prominent ghost-story writer M. R. James drew attention to Le Fanu by writing introductions to several reissued volumes of his out-of-print works. V. S. Pritchett and Elizabeth Bowen also wrote essays championing Le Fanu as one of Gothic literature's foremost figures. In 1978, Jack Sullivan summarized the opinion of modern critics in his assessment of Le Fanu's achievement: "Beginning with Le Fanu, one of the distinctive features of modern ghostly fiction is . . . [the] synthesis of psychology and supernaturalism." While he is not well-known today as a novelist, Le Fanu is noted by horror writers and aficionados as an innovative and masterful writer of psychological horror stories and as a pivotal figure in the history of supernatural fiction.

## Responses to Literature

1. Discuss Le Fanu's innovations in the ghost story genre. What were the common features of ghost

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Sheridan Le Fanu was the first modern writer of tales of vampires and ghosts, but was by no means the last. Other works that feature such creatures include:

*Dracula* (1897), a novel by Bram Stoker. A bridge between gothic novels and modern horror literature, the tale, told through diary entries, has inspired countless adaptations, imitations, and continuations in both literature and film.

"The Wendigo" (1910), a short story by Algernon Blackwood. Blackwood was considered by many of his contemporaries to be one of the greatest horror writers of all time; this short story, a tale of a Canadian hunting trip gone horribly wrong, is often cited as his best.

*Interview with the Vampire*, a novel by Anne Rice (1976). A somber, existential take on the vampire myth, this book is written as a confession given by a two-hundred-year-old vampire.

stories prior to Le Fanu? What elements of his work were copied by authors who came after him?

2. In what ways do Le Fanu's stories reflect his Irish upbringing, both from a religious and cultural standpoint? Provide examples from his work.
3. Le Fanu was a master of indirect horror, usually derived from a supernatural element that remains ambiguous or not fully seen. In modern books and film, horror is often more direct: Killers and monsters are often described in full physical and emotional detail. Why do you think modern tales focus more on direct horror than indirect horror? Which do you think is more effective, and why?
4. Compare Le Fanu's vampire Carmilla to Stoker's Dracula. How do the two authors present vampires? What is the significance of Le Fanu using a female for his vampire as opposed to Stoker's male?

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## Leonid Leonov

BORN: 1899, Moscow, Russia

DIED: 1994, Moscow, Russia

NATIONALITY: Russian

GENRE: Fiction, drama, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

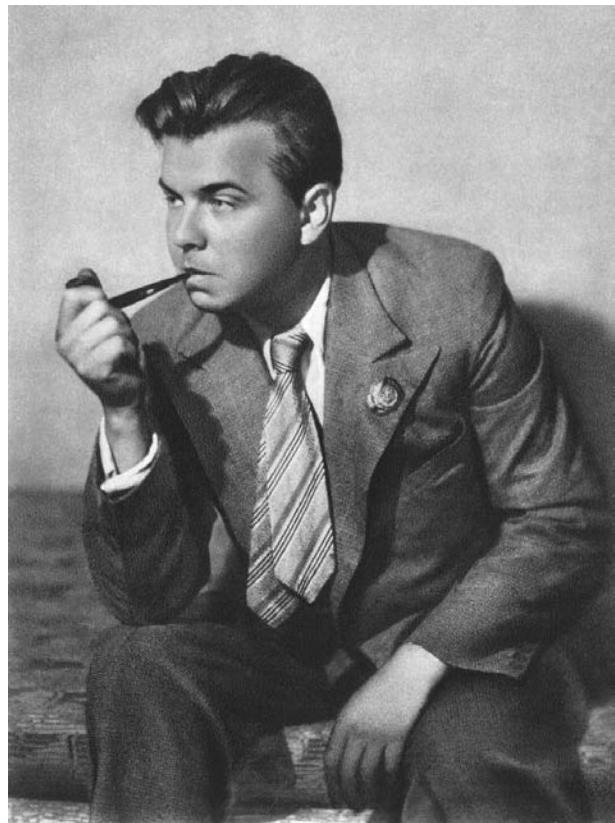
- The Thief* (1931)  
*The Golden Coach* (1947)  
*The Russian Forest* (1953)  
*Polia Vikrova* (1960)  
*The Escape of Mr. McKinley* (1975)

### Overview

Leonid Leonov was a prolific novelist, playwright, and essayist. He was also a philosophical writer who has justifiably been called one of the most idiosyncratic talents of modern Russian literature. Leonov's works are often said to defy the categorization that typically defines literatures of the Soviet period, and are acknowledged for their insightful depiction of the Russian character. For this reason his works have been compared to those of Russian masters Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Anti-Czarism in the Blood** Leonid Leonov was born in Moscow on May 31, 1899. His father was a poet and journalist who was arrested for anti-czarist activities and later exiled to Archangel, where he published a news-



Leonid Leonov © Mary Evans Picture Library / The Image Works

paper. Educated in Moscow, Leonov later worked for his father's newspaper as a theater critic and proofreader.

During the Russian civil war Leonov served in the Red Army, primarily as a war correspondent. The Russian civil war had followed hard upon the heels of the Revolution of 1917; in the latter, separated into two phases (a February Revolution and an October Revolution) both nationalist and socialist forces around Russia rose up against and overthrew the dictatorial regime of Czar Nicholas II. The Russian Civil War itself was a result of conflict between the Red (socialist) Army and the White (nationalist and traditionalist) forces, with the socialists—the Bolsheviks—gaining victory in 1923. Leonov edited the newspaper of the Fifteenth Inzenskaia Division in 1920 and worked for the newspaper of the Moscow Military District from 1921 to 1922. It was also in 1922 that Leonov published his first short story, "Buruya," in the journal *Shipovnik. Al'manakh 1*.

**A Red Journalist Turns to Fiction** After his demobilization, Leonov published a short-story collection, but his first real success came in 1924 with the publication of his novel *The Badgers*. The novel's title derives from a group of anti-Soviet brigands who called themselves "the Badgers," and is the story of Semen and Pavel Rakhleev, two teenage brothers from the countryside who are

brought to Moscow to earn their living. The story takes place before and after the October Revolution and provides a rich panoramic view of Russia in the 1910s and early 1920s. Semen gets drafted, fights in World War I, and eventually returns a deserter, while Pavel, after remaining out of sight for a long time, becomes a Communist. The fact that the brothers end up on opposite sides of the civil war reflects the deep fissures that the revolutionary period caused among Russians.

Leonov made a name for himself as well as a huge impact on the further development of Soviet literature with the novel. *The Badgers* was then adapted by Leonov into a play of the same title; it premiered in 1927 at the Vakhtangov Theater in Moscow, which had a company of artists who had gained a nationwide reputation for their bold yet entertaining experimentalism.

**Political Success Gives Way to Suppression** Leonov followed up *The Badgers* with an even more critically acclaimed book, *The Thief* (1927), the novel that for many years served as his central work and remained his own favorite almost until the end of his life. The subsequent success of *The Thief* brought him a measure of political as well as artistic success: “He had arrived,” as R. D. B. Thomson observed, and was soon elected to the governing board of the Union of Soviet Writers.

Prior to the 1930s, writers in the Soviet Union were not heavily restricted. With the emergence of socialist realism, however—and specifically with the 1932 publication of Joseph Stalin’s infamous directive, “On the Reconstruction of Literary and Art Organizations”—Soviet writers suffered more intense scrutiny. Socialist realism was an art theory based partially on Marxist philosophy and partially on Soviet politics: It called for the didactic use of literature, art, and music to develop social consciousness in the evolving socialist state, and was a key tool during the beginning of the Stalinist purges. These developments had dramatic implications for Leonov’s career. Leonov’s fifth novel, *Road to the Ocean* (1935), was almost immediately suppressed and from the mid-1930s through the 1940s his works came under official attack. No new editions of his novels were issued until 1947, and his play *The Snowstorm* (1939) was suppressed in 1940 during rehearsals for its Moscow premiere.

**World War II: Dramatic Renewal and Political Rehabilitation** World War II—or “the Great Patriotic War,” as it was called in the Soviet Union—gave Leonov a chance to “rehabilitate” himself in the eyes of Soviet officialdom. He wrote two successful war dramas, *The Invasion* (1942), for which he won the Stalin Prize, and *Lenushka* (1943). As reflected by their many productions, both of these plays were popular with Soviet viewers and won high praise from Soviet and Allied critics alike.

Except for the novella *The Taking of Velikoshumsk* (1944), Leonov did not publish any new extended prose works until 1953—the year of Stalin’s death. He instead

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Leonov’s famous contemporaries include:

**Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–1986): A French author and metaphysical philosopher who laid the foundations for early feminism with her writing.

**Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956): A German playwright, stage director, and poet who is credited, among many things, with epic theater.

**M. C. Escher** (1898–1972): A Dutch graphic artist who is world-renowned for his woodcuts, lithographs, and mezzotints that trick the eye, seem to defy logic or physics, and feature explorations of topics including infinity and the impossible.

**Charles de Gaulle** (1890–1970): A French general and statesman who led the Free French Forces during World War II, and founder and first president of the French Fifth Republic.

**Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** (1918–2008): A Soviet novelist famous for his lengthy imprisonment and exile at the hands of the Soviet government due to his “anti-Soviet” views.

devoted his efforts during this period to dramas. Beginning in 1946, Leonov also served as a Deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, a post he kept for twenty-four years, until 1970.

**A Series of Final Triumphs** After two decades of literary obscurity, Leonov published his last major novel, *Russian Forest* (1953), which scholar Reinhard Lauer called “the most significant work to be published in those years in Russia.” A substantially revised version of *The Thief* was issued in 1959, and in 1963 Leonov published *Evgenia Ivanovna*, a novel that he had begun writing in the mid-1930s. Leonov also wrote criticism and essays and published two fragments of an untitled novel-in-progress during the 1970s and 1980s. He even adapted one of his own stories for the science fiction film *The Escape of Mr. McKinley* (1975). He died in Moscow in 1994.

## Works in Literary Context

**Fairy Tale and Philosophy Influences** Early stories by Leonov feature unusual stylistic daring and originality in their usage of *skaz*, a technique of narrative that derives from Russian oral folklore. Leonov’s *skaz* pieces, such as his 1922 story “Buryga,” for instance, reveal the influence of Nikolai Leskov—often called “the most Russian of all Russian writers.” Some early stories by Leonov

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Known for their psychological and philosophical complexity, Leonov's works address such themes as the conflict between the individual and society, the moral dilemmas associated with revolutionary upheaval, and the antagonism between urban and rural cultures. Here are a few works by writers who concerned themselves with similar themes of social, political, and individual conflict:

*Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), a novel by Alan Paton. In this acclaimed work, South African apartheid is encroaching—against the social protests of select individuals and subcultures.

*Freedom Songs* (1991), a historical novel by Yvette Moore. In this novel for young adults, the author explores the life of one family living in the early 1960s and the impact the civil rights movement has on that family.

*Maus* (1977), a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman. In this unusual and provocative treatment of the Holocaust, the Jewish people are portrayed as mice and the Nazis are depicted as cats.

*Things Fall Apart* (1959), a novel by Chinua Achebe. This novel explores the story of colonialism and its invasive and destructive impact on Nigerian tribal culture.

*The U.S.A. Trilogy* (1938), a trilogy by John Dos Passos. In this collection of three novels, the author uses innovative techniques to explore the development of America in the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s—including close inspections of the treatment of immigrants, urban plight, and workers' unions.

betray, rather intentionally, the influence of writers other than Leskov. Shades of Dostoyevsky appear in "The End of a Petty Man" (1924), with Leonov's tendency toward the philosophical. E. T. A. Hoffmann's stories also have a bearing on "Valya's Doll" (1923), and the impact of Boris Andreevich Pil'niak is evident in "Egorushka's Demise" (1924).

**Ornamentalism and the Mystical** What unites these stories is their stylistic "ornamentalism"—a kind of overuse of decoration, or ornaments, in prose. What also connects them is a tendency toward the spheres of the mysterious and the mystical. A third kind of connection between Leonov's writings can be found in the inspiration he found in oral narration, which has a tradition in Russia both of being very ornamental at times and of negotiating the boundaries of the mystical. In *The Breakthrough at Petrushikha* (1923), for instance, a history of a village and its community, there is a fairy-tale rhythm that sometimes ends in near rhyme—seamlessly

integrated in the prose, such as in "the moon is in the window, Yegory is on the horse" and other phrases.

**The Individual's Place in Society** Added to this extensive use of figurative language (such as metaphors and similes) is Leonov's use of stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques and complex symbolism to support his philosophical concepts. Underlying his great novels, for example, is the image of the beehive as a model of an ideal social organism—a helpful community, benevolent, productive, and harmonious.

Such techniques support the themes important to Leonov throughout his writing career—in general, themes of individual morality, happiness, and purity, and the relation of the individual to society. Leonov is particularly known for works in which he explored political and social issues in postrevolutionary Soviet society. The central theme in his works is the conflict between the demands of society and the needs of the individual. In his writings about the revolution, he often focused on marginalized participants who did not fully understand what was occurring. *The Badgers*, for instance, set in the early 1920s, centers on a group of peasants in the remote Russian countryside who reject the Soviet government and engage in guerrilla warfare against Soviet officials and the Red Army. Leonov used this story to address the conflict between the urban proletariat and the peasantry. In keeping with the tenets of socialist realism, however, such themes soon had to be abandoned, and Leonov's orientation toward the mystical, too, became suspect. Instead, he was urged by some to emulate the work of artists such as writer Maxim Gorky or painter Fyodor Pavlovich Reshetnikov, both of whom were seen as providing positive examples of socialist realism in practice.

### Works in Critical Context

At only twenty-three years of age, Leonov enjoyed the mixed blessing of having been officially declared a "living classic" in the presence of Joseph Stalin himself. This honor vested upon him by his fatherly friend, Maxim Gorky, saved his life and career in an era of ruthlessness and violence. Moreover, when Stalin designated Leonov as a "rightful heir to Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Gogol," much interest was generated in Communist officialdom. Leonov cunningly employed this title to protect himself, his family, his religious faith, and his art.

Using his status as a recognized "classic," Leonov consciously built his body of works and his public literary persona according to the conventions of the classics of Russian literature. At a certain point in Leonov's career this goal of image building, reinforced by numerous articles on his work, seems to have gained priority over being popular and known to common readers. As a result, beginning in the 1960s Leonov was respected and read by sections of the Russian intelligentsia but hardly ever loved—not even during the period when he was fighting for a popular cause, the rescue of the Russian Forest. Yet

several of his works remain important in their representation of a culture and a historical period for Russian literature—including such early novels as *The Badgers*.

***The Badgers* (1924)** *The Badgers* displays expertise in the usage of language and a psychological depth unprecedented in Soviet literature, such that even readers critical or suspicious of Leonov had to concede that he had written a masterpiece. With regard to this and all of Leonov's works, however, commentators have noted that they are sometimes overwritten. Another concern among Leonov's critics has been his likeness to Dostoyevsky. Many have noted extensive similarities between the works of the two novelists; however, while some have argued that Leonov was deeply concerned with moral, philosophical, and psychological problems, others have insisted that he was not at all motivated by the intense concern with ethics, morality, and religion that characterized Dostoevsky's writings. Vera Alexandrova, for instance, has questioned "the view of some Russian critics abroad that, were Leonov free in his creative work, he would have become a 'Soviet Dostoevsky.'"

***Truly in Opposition?*** Critics have also questioned whether Leonov was simply stubborn and arrogant or truly a writer who opposed the government and managed to escape severe repression. Remarking on the "seeming conventionality" of Leonov's career, R. D. B. Thomson has argued that "of all the Soviet writers, Leonid Leonov is the most individual. His elaborate style, his highly personal thought and imagery, his characteristic range of heroes, and above all the acute conflicts on which his works are built . . . distinguish his books from those of his compatriots and contemporaries."

Once a darling of both Soviet and Western literary historians and critics—who likened Leonov to William Faulkner—he is rarely mentioned in critical discourse today and read even less frequently. A closer, unbiased look at Leonov's work in its evolution, however, reveals a mastery of language matched by few authors of any nation.

## Responses to Literature

1. In some early versions of his most popular novels, Leonov elicits sympathy for his main characters; in other versions he strips the protagonist of his favorable qualities. Consider the novels *The Badgers* and *The Thief* and describe the theme of honor among thieves. In each work, is the theme helpful in bringing sympathy or contempt for the protagonists?
2. Communist conservatives attacked Leonov's fiction. Look into one or more of his works and find out why they did so. To assist you in making sense of the criticisms, find examples from Leonid's text that skewer Russian ideological failings.
3. The Russian civil war lasted from 1918 to 1923 and involved "Red" Soviet forces, who gained decisive power in the October 1917 Revolution, fighting

"White" Russian anti-Communist insurgents. Research the Russian civil war further to discover how it impacted civilians. How is this impact reflected in Leonov's work?

4. Works like *Road to the Ocean* are distinguished by the stream-of-consciousness technique Leonov used to describe the characters and delve into numerous philosophical debates. His narrations are done through the ongoing thought processes of characters. Find examples of stream-of-consciousness writing in Leonov and in Virginia Woolf, Jamaica Kincaid, Henry James, James Joyce, or others, and then try imitating this style. Can you turn ordinary observation into interesting interior monologue?

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## Doris Lessing

BORN: 1919, Kermanshah, Persia

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Grass Is Singing* (1950)

*The Golden Notebook* (1962)

*Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971)

*The Summer before the Dark* (1973)

## Overview

Considered among the most powerful contemporary novelists, Doris Lessing has explored many of the most



Doris Lessing AP Images

important ideas, ideologies, and social issues of the twentieth century. Her works display a broad range of interests, including such topics as racism, communism, feminism, psychology, and mysticism. Lessing created strong-willed, independent heroines who suffer emotional crises in a male-dominated society, thus anticipating many feminist concerns. These works, particularly the five-volume *Children of Violence* series and *The Golden Notebook* (1962), were especially praised for their complex narrative techniques and convincing characterizations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Lessing attempted to function as a visionary figure for what she termed the "emancipated reader." Her works of speculative fiction, which make use of science fiction elements, are characterized by a sense of imminent apocalypse. Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Growing Up in Africa** Doris May Tayler was born in Kermanshah, Persia, on October 22, 1919, to Alfred Cook Tayler, an employee of the Imperial Bank of Persia, and Emily Maude McVeagh Tayler, a nurse. In 1924 Lessing's father took the family to Southern Rhodesia

(now Zimbabwe), hoping to make a fortune growing corn and tobacco and panning for gold. The family found little fortune on its new farm, which was located in a remote corner of the Rhodesian bush not far from the border with Mozambique. Lessing was educated first at a convent school and then at a government school for girls, both in the capital city of Salisbury. She returned home at about age twelve because of recurrent eye troubles and received no further formal education. At age sixteen she began working as a typist for a telephone company and was later employed by a law firm. She also worked as a Hansard secretary in the Rhodesian Parliament, then as a typist for the *Guardian*, a South African newspaper based in Cape Town.

In the 1940s, South Africa functioned under a system known as apartheid, which is Afrikaans for "separateness." This government-sponsored system involved designating certain buildings, areas, and services for use only by certain races and forbade people of different races from marrying. It also led to the segregation of living areas within South Africa, with black citizens of different cultural groups kept separate from each other; this allowed the white Afrikaners, who were descended from European colonists and made up a small percentage of the population, to remain in control of the large non-white population.

In 1949 Lessing left Africa behind for London. Her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), was published the following year and was immediately well received. Like many of the novels and short stories that would follow its debut, *The Grass Is Singing* deals with settings, characters, and issues very close to its author's experience of Rhodesian society and, in particular, relations between white colonists and black citizens. "The Grass Is Singing," an essayist for *Feminist Writers* explained, "was hailed as a breakthrough look at the horrors of South African apartheid. However, upon a second reading, the novel may seem focused on the desperate situation of a lively woman who is beat down by the grayness of her married life and the bleakness of anything the future might hold. Yet another reading of the novel brings out the harshness of the African landscape, the overwhelming power of nature, and the impending defeat of any human who tries to challenge those obstacles. Therein lies the strength of Lessing's talent, the layering of story within story."

**The Golden Notebook and Beyond** Lessing's major and most controversial novel is *The Golden Notebook* (1962), wherein she explores, as a *New Statesman* reviewer noted, what it is like to be "free and responsible, a woman in relation to men and other women, and to struggle to come to terms with one's self about these things and about writing and politics." Lessing once explained that the work is "a novel about certain political and sexual attitudes that have force now; it is an attempt to explain them, to objectivize them, to set them in relation with each other.

So in a way it is a social novel, written by someone whose training—or at least whose habit of mind—is to see these things socially, not personally.” In its structure, the novel is really two novels, divided in four sections. Lessing split it into four parts to “express a split person. I felt that if the artist’s sensibility is to be equated with the sensibility of the educated person, then it is logical to use different styles to express different kinds of people.” She felt that the “personality is very much what is remembered; [the form] enabled me to say to the reader: Look, these apparently so different people have got so-and-so in common, or these things have got this in common. If I had used a conventional style, the old-fashioned novel, . . . I would not have been able to do this kind of playing with time, memory and the balancing of people. . . . I like *The Golden Notebook* even though I believe it to be a failure, because it at least hints at complexity.”

After her initial flourishing as a writer, during which time she explored the Africa of her youth from her new home in London, Lessing turned away from the land of her past and toward new settings: inner space and outer space. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971) is a novel of ideas based on her interest in the views of British psychiatrist R. D. Laing. In subsequent novels, Lessing has continued to produce work critiquing modern society. In contrast to the realism that marked her earlier novels, Lessing’s work of the late twentieth century would take startling new forms. In the five “Canopus” books she explores the destruction of life brought about by catastrophe and tyranny.

**Return to Africa** After leaving Southern Rhodesia in 1949, Lessing returned to Africa only once, in 1956, an experience she recounts in *Going Home*. After this first homecoming, the white minority government blocked any future returns because of Lessing’s criticism of apartheid. It was not until the 1980s, after years of civil war and thousands of deaths brought the black majority to power in the newly christened Zimbabwe, that Lessing could return. In *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* she chronicles her trips to southern Africa in 1982, 1988, 1989, and 1992. On one level, this book offers the keen observations of a new nation’s growing pains through the eyes of someone who is neither an insider nor an outsider. She saw first a country trying to come to terms with the outcome of a long and bloody civil war based on race. In subsequent trips, she found exuberance, corruption, and finally decline.

**Accolades and Criticism Late in Life** In 2007, Doris Lessing was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. That same year, she published *The Cleft*, a novel almost universally panned by critics. In her 2008 novel *Alfred and Emily*, Lessing returns to the subject of her childhood in Rhodesia and the profound effects of World War I on her parents.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lessing’s famous contemporaries include:

**Thomas Keneally** (1935–): This Australian novelist is best known for his novel *Schindler’s List* (1982), which was later adapted into a film of the same title.

**Iris Murdoch** (1919–1999): An Irish novelist renowned for such works as *Under the Net* (1954).

**Aldous Huxley** (1894–1963): English novelist, essayist, poet, and short story writer best known for his novel *Brave New World* (1932).

**John Cheever** (1912–1982): An American fiction writer most famous for his highly acclaimed short stories, including “The Enormous Radio” (1947).

**Nelson Mandela** (1919–): After spending twenty-seven years as a political prisoner of the apartheid government of South Africa, Mandela became president of South Africa in 1994 after the country’s first fully racially representative election.

## Works in Literary Context

Lessing’s influences are diverse. Throughout her career as a writer, she has espoused various philosophic allegiances, and, not surprisingly, her fiction reflects these commitments. *Retreat to Innocence* (1956) is an explicitly pro-Marxist work, but since her defection from the Communist party, she has disowned that novel. *The Golden Notebook* reflects a Jungian interest, partly in the nature of the psychoanalyst whom Lessing’s protagonist in that novel consults. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), the novel published immediately after *The Golden Notebook* and the last two parts of the Children of Violence series, shows a distinct correlation to and dependence upon the work of psychiatrist R. D. Laing.

While Lessing’s work has its referents, particularly psychiatrists and psychologists, Lessing is unafraid of carving out new ground for her work.

**Journey through Inner Space** When *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* was published, critics noticed the contrasts between it and Lessing’s previous work. Even though the same dominant themes of mental imbalance and psychic phenomena that were used in *The Golden Notebook* and in *The Four-Gated City* (1969) are to be found here as well, there are some major differences. For one thing, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* has as its protagonist one of the few men to serve this purpose in any of Lessing’s longer fiction: Charles Watkins is a classics professor at Cambridge University, and his mental and emotional “journey” and eventual restoration to psychic health constitute the book’s plot.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Lessing's work often revolves around journeys, both literal and psychological. Here are some other works about journeying and how they change a person's soul and mind.

*Into the Wild* (1996), a nonfiction work by Jon Krakauer.

Based on the life of Christopher McCandless, this text follows the last days of a young man who leaves behind his privileged family to explore the world only to perish in the wilds of Alaska.

*The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), a religious allegory by John Bunyan. This allegory describes the journey that Christians must take in order to avoid sin and, ultimately, make it to heaven.

*The Lord of the Rings* (1955), a trilogy of novels by J. R. R. Tolkien. The three novels describe the journey of Frodo, a hobbit, to Mordor to destroy a ring of evil power while facing along the way bigger and fiercer enemies who wish to kill him.

Lessing called this book "inner-space fiction," a label intended to suggest that it is Watkins's mental health rather than any actual physical journey that is at the heart of the book.

**Structural Experimentation** *The Golden Notebook* (1962) has generally been acclaimed as Lessing's masterpiece, though it is considerably less accessible than any of her earlier novels or most of her subsequent ones. It is a complex maze of differing perspectives on the same woman's life and circumstances and structurally is an exceedingly carefully controlled series of overlapping "notebooks." Lessing has repeatedly said that "the point [in this book] was the relation of its parts to each other" and that its "meaning is in the shape." Her original intent was to write a short formal novel that would serve to enclose all the rest of her material in the book, but since the formal novel is "ridiculous" when it "can't say a... thing," she split up the material not included in the short formal novel into four "notebooks," each concerned with a different though similar aspect of one woman's life, and then in turn divided each notebook into four parts. The result is a technique in which first a part of the short novel—called "Free Women"—is given, then one part each of the black, red, blue, and yellow notebooks; this pattern is repeated four times. Then there is a short section of the entire novel, also called "The Golden Notebook," followed by the concluding "Free Women" section that ends the novel. Hence the reader can either read from page one to the end of the book, or, if the reader wishes, read all the parts of each notebook and "Free Women" together.

## Works in Critical Context

Although Lessing has enjoyed a long and fruitful career, critical response to her work has been sharply divided. She has at times received near universal acclaim for works like *The Golden Notebook*, but then readers must contend with *The Summer Before the Dark*, which has the ironic distinction of being both one of Lessing's most popular—and profitable—novels and one of the most severely criticized.

**The Golden Notebook** When *The Golden Notebook* was published in 1962, it was welcomed with both enthusiasm and some apprehension at its unique structure. Frederick R. Karl, writing for *Contemporary Literature* called it "the most considerable work by an English author in the 1960s," though he also considers it a "carefully-organized but verbose, almost clumsily written novel." Where the author succeeds, according to Karl, is "in her attempt to write honestly about women." Walter Allen expressed similar sentiments in *The Modern Novel*, stating, "As a work of art, *The Golden Notebook* seems to me to fail. The structure is clumsy, complicated rather than complex." However, he considers the book impressive "as an exposition of the emotional problems that face an intelligent woman who wishes to live in the kind of freedom a man may take for granted." Paul Schlueter concurs, noting that the novel "captures the authentic quality of what it is to be a woman, especially a woman in a man's world."

## Responses to Literature

1. Read *The Golden Notebook*. Analyze your reaction to the formal experimentation of the text. Do you believe this form for this text is the best? Why or why not?
2. Read Dante's *Inferno* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Both of these texts describe hellish journeys. Compare Lessing and Dante's portrayals of "hell." Analyze the effects each achieves in your understanding of the texts.
3. Using the Internet and the library, research the word *apartheid*, particularly as it relates to the racial divisions in Africa. In a brief essay, compare your findings to Lessing's representation of racism in Africa.

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## Primo Levi

BORN: 1919, Turin, Italy

DIED: 1987, Turin, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*If This Is a Man* (1947)

*The Reawakening* (1963)

*The Periodic Table* (1975)

*The Drowned and the Saved* (1986)

### Overview

Primo Levi, an Italian chemist and concentration camp survivor, is a writer whose explorations of contemporary morality put him at the forefront of Holocaust literature. He is most often associated with Holocaust writing because of his first two books, *If This Is a Man* (1947; republished as *Survival in Auschwitz*, 1961) and *The Reawakening* (1963). *If This Is a Man* is generally regarded as the most powerful description of the Nazi camps ever written and, like all of his subsequent work, is noted for its extraordinary equanimity and lack of rancor. Levi published many other kinds of writing during a forty-year career: occasional and op-ed pieces, poetry, short fiction, and novels. With the objective scrutiny of a scientist, the linguistic grace of a poet, and the profound understanding of a philosopher, Levi confronted the major issues of the twentieth century.



Primo Levi Levi, Primo, photograph by Jerry Bauer. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Imprisoned as a Young Man** Primo Levi was born in Turin, Italy on July 31, 1919, less than a year after the close of World War I and three years before Benito Mussolini’s Fascist takeover of Italy’s government. He lived most of his life in the spacious apartment on Corso Re Umberto where he grew up. His family was part of a small, highly assimilated middle-class Jewish community, whose roots went back to the sixteenth century. Both his father and grandfather were engineers, and Levi cited his father as the source of his lifelong interests in science and literature. His mother was also an avid reader who devoted herself to raising Primo and his younger sister, Anna Maria.

Skinny, frail, and bright, Levi excelled in both literature and the sciences in high school and opted to pursue the latter. He enrolled in the University of Turin in 1937, at the age of seventeen. While he was studying chemistry, World War II was approaching. Mussolini established racial laws that called for the official persecution of Italian Jews. Levi graduated with honors in 1941, and took a job as a chemist under a false name; the official anti-Semitism severely limited his career options. He and his peers first

reacted by withdrawal; as he once wrote: "We proclaimed ourselves the enemies of Fascism, but actually Fascism had had its effect on us, as on almost all Italians, alienating us and making us superficial, passive and cynical." But as the Nazi party took over northern Italy, Levi could no longer afford to be passive. He joined the partisan fighters in 1943, but his band was poorly trained and ill-equipped, and on December 13, 1943, it was ambushed by the Fascist militia. Convinced that he would be shot as a partisan, Levi admitted under questioning that he was Jewish.

He was sent to an Italian concentration camp at Fossoli, near Modena. Two months later, German troops sent the Italian Jewish prisoners to Auschwitz. Five hundred of them were immediately gassed to death, and the rest were put to slave labor. For eleven months, Levi worked at a rubber factory in the death camp. Intimates of the author speculate that his innate curiosity about his environment and his training as a dispassionate scientific observer enabled him to overcome despair and keep his spirit intact under dehumanizing conditions. Levi himself attributed his survival to good luck.

***If This Is a Man*** Release came in January 1945 with the arrival of Allied Russian forces. Levi was one of only three partisans to survive. After a long, tortuous journey—described in detail in *The Reawakening*—Levi returned home to Turin and found work as a chemist in a paint factory. Though he had not aspired to be a writer before his internment, Levi was compelled to tell the story of the millions who perished. He completed *If This Is a Man* within two years.

Levi offered the completed manuscript of *If This Is a Man* to the Turin publishing house of Einaudi, but its editors rejected it, judging that the times were not yet ripe for a Holocaust memoir. An amateur publisher brought the book out in 1947 in a print run of twenty-five hundred copies. In 1958, Einaudi changed its mind and republished the book. This time the work was more successful and awakened intense interest.

***A Scientist Writes Fiction*** Throughout these years, Levi continued to make his living as a chemist, working at SIVA, a large paint factory in Turin. He became the company's general manager in 1961 and established himself as an expert in the manufacture of synthetic resins. He also married Lucia Morpurgo, a fellow Italian Jew, and had two children. Meanwhile, he contributed essays and stories to the Turin newspaper *La Stampa*. In 1963, he published his second book of Holocaust recollections, *The Reawakening*, which won the Campiello literary award.

This memoir chronicles Levi's experiences between the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945 and his return to Turin that October. There are two parallel stories: Levi's slow reawakening from the horrors of Auschwitz, together with the story of his escape from a Soviet Displaced Persons camp, followed by an adventur-

ous journey on foot and by train through war-torn Eastern Europe, and the colorful characters he meets on the way home.

Levi published two collections of short stories, *Natural Histories* in 1966 and *Structural Defect* in 1971. Sometimes labeled science fiction, these stories are often metaphysical explorations that combine scientific fact with moral and ethical issues. Levi used the pseudonym Damiano Malabaila, feeling that these works did not fit with his Holocaust writing. Under his own name, he published two works in 1975: a volume of poetry, and *The Periodic Table*, a work that mixed autobiography, Holocaust memoir, short stories, and science fiction. Many critics view the latter book, which uses Dmitri Mendeleev's table of chemical elements as its unique organizing principle, as Levi's masterpiece. Its success convinced Levi to retire from factory life to devote himself to writing.

***Late-Career Acclaim*** Primo Levi's two novels demonstrate the range of his abilities. *The Monkey's Wrench* (1978), a lighthearted story of a master rigger from Turin, demonstrated that Levi could write fiction with little or no autobiographical component. *If Not Now, When?* (1982), his only Holocaust novel, concerns a group of spirited, young Eastern European Jewish partisans bound for Palestine to build a Jewish state. Levi sought to honor those Jews who had found the strength and intelligence to actively oppose Nazism and who, in the crucible of combat, discovered a new sense of dignity and purpose. He also hoped to take advantage of his popularity in Italy to entice readers to a book infused with the culture, language, and history of an Eastern European Jewish world they knew virtually nothing about. The novel won two major Italian literary prizes.

The English publication of *The Periodic Table* in 1984 raised the author's profile still further. With the renewed interest in his prior works, Levi had become an internationally recognized lecturer. The book that cemented his stature as a Holocaust writer was also his last, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), a series of eight penetrating essays that sum up the Holocaust issues that had occupied him for forty years, including memory, justice, the uses of violence by totalitarian regimes, the role of the intellectual in times of upheaval, and the responsibility of ordinary Germans for the Holocaust.

In 1987, at the height of his fame, Primo Levi fell to his death in the stairway of his apartment building. His death was declared a suicide rather than an accident, but some doubt that verdict. It is clear that Levi suffered from chronic depression, caused in part by his memories of the camps, but questions around his death remain hotly disputed. Regardless of the manner of his death, his written work is a testament to the survival and affirmation of the human spirit.

## Works in Literary Context

Levi had a very sound literary education; in his youth, he read the works of Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, Franz Kafka, and other giants. He had a special affinity for Dante, and scholars such as Risa Sodi have noted the numerous references to *The Divine Comedy* in Levi's writings on the Holocaust. Nonetheless, when he began writing down the recollections that grew into *If This Is a Man* he followed no literary guide; his model was to be found in his scientific training, with its emphasis on dispassionate observation and precision. The best of his work always retained this objectivity and curiosity, almost childlike at times, about the processes of life. The experimental fiction he wrote later reveals the influences of Jack London and Jules Verne.

**Diverse Styles** Levi displayed a remarkable range in his writing: from science fiction to meditative essays, from poetry to the picaresque, and from travel literature to autobiography. Nonetheless, it is often difficult to separate Levi's works into conventional categories of genre, subject, or even style. Some of his strongest works, such as *The Periodic Table*, are unclassifiable hybrids.

**Ethical Inquiry** One common thread running through Levi's body of work is a concern for the ethical dimensions of modern life. Due to the unusual pairing of the two dominant events in Levi's life—his career in the sciences and his internment in Auschwitz—a relentless spirit of inquiry, especially inquiry into the nature of good and evil, blazes through his literary output. In dealing with his experience at Auschwitz, Levi examines humanity's capacity for virtue and evil by portraying both the innocent victims of the Nazis and those who responded to them in despicable ways. Critics agree that even the stories that do not concern the Holocaust deepen the reader's understanding of humanity in moral crises. Some of his imaginative short stories raise questions about the implications of modern technologies, taking an ambivalent perspective on technical progress. Levi is at his best when identifying and addressing the moral questions raised by political, scientific, or cultural concerns and situations.

## Works in Critical Context

Although Levi had initial difficulties finding an audience for his Auschwitz memoir, his subsequent writings were uniformly successful and admired by critics. *If This Is a Man* was adapted for theatrical and radio dramatization. This work and its sequel, *The Reawakening*, were each translated into several languages. Levi became a major literary figure in his home country; five of his books won prestigious Italian literary prizes.

In the English-speaking world, Levi achieved renown after 1984, when publication of *The Periodic Table* in the United States prompted acclaim by Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow and prominent American book reviewers. All of Levi's major works were translated into

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Levi's famous contemporaries include:

**Saul Bellow** (1915–2005): Canadian-American novelist and Nobel Prize winner.

**Federico Fellini** (1920–1993): Italian filmmaker, one of the leading figures in the history of world cinema.

**Isaac Asimov** (1920–1982): Russian-American writer and biochemist; highly prolific author of both science fiction and popular works of science.

**Italo Calvino** (1923–1985): Italian novelist and journalist.

**Philip K. Dick** (1928–1982): American science fiction author.

**Jerzy Kosinski** (1933–1991): Polish American novelist, author of the Holocaust classic *The Painted Bird* (1965).

English over the next five years, cementing his stature as a Holocaust writer and thinker at home and abroad.

In terms of overall critical and public interest, Primo Levi's autobiographical writing receives the lion's share of attention and acclaim. Critics have praised the impressive range of knowledge, insight, and originality evidenced by his essays, often noting that Levi's talents transcend his role as a witness of the Holocaust. Some reviewers find his fiction weak in comparison to his nonfiction writings about the Holocaust, although some praise his speculative stories as imaginative vehicles for social commentary arising from Levi's scientific training. Mirna Cicioni argues that through his diverse literary offerings, Levi sought to build bridges between different fields of human endeavor.

**If This Is a Man** Although *If This Is a Man* had only limited success when it was first published, a later Italian edition of the book led to greater acclaim and translated versions of the book. When it was finally translated and published in English over a decade after its original publication, Alfred Werner of *Saturday Review* stated, "After the lapse of a dozen years, it is still overwhelmingly fresh and powerful in English translation, a useful reminder of events we must never forget." David Caute of *New Statesman* called it "one of the most remarkable documents I have read." Even the passing of years has not diminished the memoir's power and importance. Philip Roth, in a posthumous tribute to the author in the *Observer* in 1987, referred to *If This Is a Man* as "one of the century's truly necessary books."

## Responses to Literature

1. Summarize the psychological effects of surviving the Nazi camps, as identified in Levi's Holocaust

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Holocaust recollections of Levi have been likened to a news report from hell. Here are some classic literary visions—fictional as well as factual—of ultimate punishment.

*A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), a novel by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. This book was the first published work depicting the brutality of the Soviet prison camps.

*Night* (1958), a memoir by Elie Wiesel. One of the classic works of Holocaust literature, it is based on the author's experience in the concentration camps with his father. *No Exit* (1944), a play by Jean-Paul Sartre. A man and two women are locked in a small room to irritate each other for eternity, resulting in their realization that "Hell is other people."

*The Trial* (1925), a novel by Franz Kafka. Josef K is arrested, put on trial, and sentenced, but never told the crime of which he is accused.

*Inferno* from *The Divine Comedy* (early fourteenth century), an epic poem by Dante Alighieri. The poet Virgil guides Dante through "the nine circles of hell" in the central epic poem of the Italian literary tradition.

writings. How would age or gender factor into the psychological effects of the trauma? Does faith enter into the psychological schema at all?

2. Write an essay about Levi's perspective on science and its relationship to human ethics. Are the two in conflict with one another? Are there certain issues that will undoubtedly raise conflict? Does Levi somehow harmonize science and ethics in a positive light, or indicate how the meshing of the two can go seriously awry?
3. In *The Periodic Table*, how does Levi use chemical elements to make allegorical statements about the human condition? Why would he use this type of metaphor? Do you think it is an effective allegory? Why or why not?
4. Literary critics continue to debate whether Primo Levi's death was a suicide or an accident. What issues and motivations do you think underlie this controversy, and how do they affect the critical perception of Levi's body of work?

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## C.S. Lewis

BORN: 1898, Belfast, Northern Ireland, U.K.

DIED: 1963, Oxford, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933)

*The Allegory of Love* (1936)

*The Screwtape Letters* (1942)

*The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956)



C. S. Lewis *Lewis, C.S., 1956, photograph.* AP Images.

## Overview

The British novelist and essayist C.S. Lewis (1898–1963) was an established literary figure whose impact is increasingly recognized by scholars and teachers. He is known and respected for both his allegorical fantasy, particularly the classic children's series *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1965), as well as his accessible and persuasive works on Christian belief and theology such as *The Screwtape Letters* (1941) and *Mere Christianity* (1952).

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on November 29, 1898, the son of Albert J. and Flora Hamilton Lewis. His mother died when he was still a boy. Little Lea, the family home, had long corridors, empty rooms, and secret nooks in which Lewis and his brother, Warren, played. In the attic, the boys spent many rainy days writing and illustrating stories about imaginary worlds. Sometimes, when their cousin came to visit, the three of them would climb into a black oak wardrobe, hand-carved by Lewis and Warren's grandfather, and sit in the dark while Lewis told stories. These boyhood playtimes would be famously fictionalized years later in the children's fantasy classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), the first in the seven-book *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. In the series, four brothers

and sisters travel to another world called Narnia by various means, first finding it through the back of a large wardrobe.

Lewis's early education was by private tutoring, at various public schools, and at Malvern College. In 1917 he entered University College, Oxford, but left to serve as a soldier in World War I. World War I was a devastating conflict that claimed the lives of many of Lewis's contemporaries—indeed, nearly 900,000 British service members died between 1914 and 1918. Lewis was one of the lucky soldiers who returned from the war. After returning to Oxford and completing his studies, Lewis taught English literature there (at Magdalen College) until 1954, the year he accepted the chairmanship of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge.

**Becoming a Christian** As an Oxford student and eventual fellow of Magdalen College, Lewis became close friends with writers and scholars who altered his worldview and encouraged him to write. This circle of friends, later dubbed the "Inklings," included J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Neville Coghill, and Owen Barfield. Like many writers who had survived the horrors of World War I, Lewis was eager to find meaning and comfort in a world that seemed to him so clearly flawed. Though he had been skeptical of the value of religion in his youth, Lewis was eventually able to find what he was looking for in Christianity. Each of his influential friends was instrumental in convincing Lewis of the reasonableness of Christianity, but it was Tolkien's views on the relevance of myth to the Christian faith that most moved him. Lewis became a Christian at the age of thirty-two.

Quiet about the details of his youth, his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (1955), fails to provide enlightenment and leaves the Lewis scholar to speculations about his early disenchantment with emotional Christianity. His autobiography does reveal, however, that he had little interest in sports as a boy and that he was an enthusiastic reader. Among his early favorite authors was G.K. Chesterton, who was himself a paradoxical and religious writer.

**Superb Conversationalist, Renowned Scholar** Widely read as an adult, his knowledge of literature was impressive and made him a superb conversationalist. Lewis thoroughly enjoyed sitting up into the early hours in college rooms "talking nonsense, poetry, theology, and metaphysics."

His subjects at Oxford were medieval and Renaissance English literature, in which he became a scholar, lecturer, and tutor of renown. His academic reputation was made secure by his *English Literature in the 16th Century* (1954) and *Experiment in Criticism* (1961). Aside from scholarly writings, his output included science fiction, children's stories, and religious apology, a genre of argumentative writing that takes the position of defending a scrutinized or often-attacked position such as religion.

**The Christian Apologist: Explaining Christianity** Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933) is an allegory presented as an apology—in this use of the term, apology means “defense” or “explanation”—for Christianity. It was not until the appearance of his second allegorical work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), however, that Lewis received acclaim by winning the coveted Hawthornden prize. This book, which addresses in easily understandable terms the theological problem of evil and related moral and ethical issues, had met with widespread success; Lewis's invitation to do a series of radio talks for the BBC was prompted no doubt by the book's popularity but also in response to its demonstration of Lewis's ability to write engagingly on complex theological issues for a nonspecialist audience.

The first four successful fifteen-minute talks—“Right and Wrong: A Clue to the Meaning of the Universe?”—were broadcast in August 1941 and later published in *Broadcast Talks* (1942) and were followed in short order by three more series: “What Christians Believe,” “Christian Behaviour,” and “Beyond Personality,” the last two separately published in 1943 and 1944. Lewis's status as a radio celebrity and as a writer and speaker in great demand was assured by the end of 1942. Throughout the remainder of World War II he pursued an exhausting schedule of speaking engagements arranged by the chaplain-in-chief of the Royal Air Force, and he lectured at numerous churches, theological societies, and religious retreats from then until the end of his life.

**Allegorical Fiction** *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), the first of the so-called Space Trilogy, is a work of allegorical science fiction, in which a scholar is kidnapped by evil scientists. Lewis was a master of allegory, or using a story symbolically to teach a broader moral or philosophical lesson. *The Screwtape Letters* (1941), for which he is perhaps best known, is a satire in which the Devil, here known as Screwtape, writes letters instructing his young nephew, Wormwood, how to tempt souls to damnation. Of his seven religious allegories for children collectively titled *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* (1965) he commented that, “stories of this kind could steal past . . . inhibitions which had dissuaded him from his own religion.”

Lewis's deft handling of allegory likely derives from G.K. Chesterton, whose *Everlasting Man* (1925) was instrumental in Lewis's conversion. While in the hospital during 1918 after being wounded in World War I, Lewis had read a volume of Chesterton's essays and later wrote of the experience: “I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. . . . His humor was of the kind which I like best—not ‘jokes’ embedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humor which is not in any way sepa-

table from the argument but is rather . . . the bloom on dialectic itself.”

**Later Years** Lewis was married, rather late in life, in 1956, to Joy Davidman Gresham, the daughter of a New York Jewish couple. She was a graduate of Hunter College and for a time was a member of the Communist Party. She had previously been married twice. When her first husband suffered a heart attack, she turned to prayer. Reading the writings of Lewis, she began to attend Presbyterian services. Later, led by his writings to Lewis himself, she divorced her second husband, William Gresham, left the Communist Party, and married Lewis. Her death preceded her husband's by some three years. C.S. Lewis died at his home in Headington, Oxford, on November 22, 1963, on the same day that writer Aldous Huxley died and U.S. president John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

## Works in Literary Context

Though Lewis reportedly read parts of John Milton's challenging *Paradise Lost* at the age of ten, his early literary influences were more ordinary: adventure novels and the Sherlock Holmes mysteries of Arthur Conan Doyle. Later, however, Lewis blossomed intellectually and became an avid scholar of ancient Greek drama and philosophy, Greek and Roman mythology, Irish mythology (an interest he shared with his contemporary W.B. Yeats), Norse mythology (an interest he shared with his friend J.R.R. Tolkien), fairy tales, and the classics of English literature. Literary influences that led Lewis toward Christianity included books by John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), the works of the German mystic Jacob Boehme, Thomas Traheren's *Centuries of Meditations* (1908), and G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* (1925).

**Fantasy and Allegory** Allegory is a kind of writing in which objects and characters are used as symbols of concepts. Lewis made memorable use of allegory, a device likely derived from his knowledge of Christian philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas. Lewis knew the allegorical mode quite well: his first autobiography, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), employs the genre, and one of his outstanding pieces of academic scholarship is *The Allegory of Love* (1936).

At times, Lewis blended allegory and pure fantasy into a kind of modern myth. In *Till We Have Faces* (1956), a retelling of the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche, the reader is clearly in the world of mythic narrative, but the book also has allegorical features. Lewis's famous *The Chronicles of Narnia* is widely accepted as a Christian allegory, though countless young readers have enjoyed it purely as a fantasy story.

**Apologetics** Lewis's importance as an essayist is identifiable with, and to a great extent owing to, his role as a popular apologist (in this context, apologist means

“defender”) for the Christian faith. Christian apology is a long tradition of scholarly explication and defense of the tenets of the faith. Lewis distinguished himself as an apologist by making complex theological concepts approachable and understandable to lay people without pandering or oversimplifying.

Lewis styled himself as a common man addressing concerns faced by all, including both the naive but honest skeptic and the unsophisticated Christian in an intellectually complex world; the title *Mere Christianity*, a phrase used by the seventeenth-century clergyman Richard Baxter, was meant to evoke the core of Christian belief system and, as well, the common intellectual issues faced by everyday believers or inquirers into the Christian faith.

### Works in Critical Context

Lewis's essays have been described by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, his biographers, as characteristically manifesting a “love of clarity,” with “striking metaphors” and “inexorable logic,” demonstrating the “ability to encapsulate a great many facts into a few words.” Nevill Coghill points to a “weight and clarity of argument, sudden turns of generalization and general paradox, the telling short sentence to sum a complex paragraph, and unexpected touches of personal approach to the reader.”

On the subject of his novels, Corbin Scott Carell writes, “Only an anti-religious bias can deny Lewis a place in the canon of worthwhile minor writers of twentieth century British fiction. He is not one of the giants (as a novelist—he is a giant as a thinker). He is not a Joyce or a Lawrence. But neither is Huxley or Orwell and they continue to be taught.”

**The Chronicles of Narnia** The seven Narnia books are fantasies written for children but intended to be appreciated by adults. The first book in the series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, has achieved fame apart from the rest, winning the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1962. The Narnia books have been both praised and criticized for intermingling mythologies, including not only classical fauns and talking animals but also Father Christmas and a Christ-like lion named Aslan (Turkish for “lion”). Despite mixed critical response, the books have gained popularity over the decades, and a set published in paperback by Puffin between 1977 and 1979 was a best seller.

### Responses to Literature

1. An allegory is a composition, whether pictorial or literary, in which immaterial or spiritual realities are directly represented by material objects. Write a short story that is an allegory. Take an abstract concept or a virtue, such as honesty or patience or courage, and

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lewis's famous contemporaries include:

- Joseph Stalin** (1879–1953): Supreme dictator of the Soviet Union for a quarter of a century, from the late 1920s until his death.
- H.L. Mencken** (1880–1956): A journalist, editor, and essayist from Baltimore, Maryland, Mencken was one of the most influential literary figures of the first half of the twentieth century.
- Ayn Rand** (1905–1982): Russian-born American writer and philosopher who developed the philosophical system known as Objectivism that celebrated individualism and capitalism and rejected organized religion. Her novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) were international best sellers.
- W.H. Auden** (1907–1973): Controversial and influential English poet and author and ardent supporter of Lewis's friend Tolkien's fantasy writings.
- Amanda McKittrick Ros** (1860–1939): Regarded by many as “the worst writer of all time,” her works were often read during meetings of the Inklings, an Oxford literary club that included Lewis and Tolkien. The object was to see how far the reader could get before he started laughing.

write a story in which the main character in human or animal form conveys the characteristics of your chosen abstract concept.

2. An apologist—from the Greek word meaning speaking in defense—chooses to speak in favor of an unpopular or widely scrutinized position. Choose a position you feel has been unfairly singled out for criticism and write a defense of it. Research the terms “straw man,” “red herring,” and “syllogism” and apply the techniques to your argument.
3. Watch the 2005 film adaptation *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or the 2008 film adaptation *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, noting where the film follows Lewis's book and where it differs. Consider elements such as theme, plot, dialogue, and characterization. Why do you think the filmmakers decided to make these changes? Prepare a class presentation in which you discuss the differences, but be sure to highlight some similarities as well. Use clips (DVD or VHS) from the movie to support your conclusions.
4. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (published between 1995 and 2000) is, like Lewis's

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Lewis focused on explaining or celebrating the Christian faith in many of his works. Other famous works of Christian apologetics include:

- City of God* (c. 410), a religious treatise by St. Augustine. Augustine wrote *City of God* to explain the benefits of Christianity and differentiate it from competing religions of the time.
- Summa Theologica* (c. 1274), a religious treatise by St. Thomas Aquinas. This unfinished work was a summary of the Christian teachings of the time.
- The Everlasting Man* (1925), a religious treatise by G.K. Chesterton. Lewis was greatly influenced by this history of Christianity.

Narnia series, a saga of children battling dark forces in an alternate world—but Pullman’s books take a distinctly anti-church position. Compare the “good” and “bad” characters in both series. What qualities make the heroes and heroines admirable? Are the qualities different in the two series? What makes the villains dangerous or evil in the two series?

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## José Lezama Lima

BORN: 1910, Campamento Militar de Colombia, Cuba

DIED: 1976, Havana, Cuba

NATIONALITY: Cuban

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

- Death of Narcissus* (1937)  
*Enemy Rumor* (1941)  
*Paradiso* (1966)

### Overview

José Lezama Lima is one of Cuba’s most important writers to date and is also recognized as being among the most distinctive Latin American poetic and novelistic voices of the twentieth century. Although he cultivated all genres except drama, poetry interested him the most. Lezama Lima’s life was almost exclusively dedicated to literature and to the development of an elaborated poetic system. To this effect, Lezama Lima himself used to say that the events of his biography were so few that they could all be connected to his literary works.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

*Early Loss of His Father, and the Trials of a Revolutionary Period* Lezama Lima was born on December 19, 1910, in a military camp near Havana where his father José María Lezama y Rodda, a military colonel, was stationed. Lezama Lima was the only son of the marriage and developed an extremely close relationship with his mother, Rosa Lima y Rosado, after his father’s death from influenza in 1919—at that time still a relatively common cause of death, even in the industrialized West. The image of his missing father haunted Lezama Lima for the rest of his life and came to figure prominently in his late novel *Paradiso* (1966).

The young Lezama Lima suffered from frequent attacks of asthma, which kept him secluded from other children and helped instill in him a great love of reading. He studied classical Spanish literature at the Colegio San Francisco de Paula under Fernando Sirgo and afterward enrolled at the Universidad de la Habana as a law student.

Lezama Lima’s life began to be impacted by the revolutionary politics of this period while Gerardo Machado was reigning as Cuba’s dictator (1925–1933). Lezama Lima’s formal schooling underwent a four-year hiatus when Machado, because of a student protest, shut down the university. Lezama Lima used the period—a difficult one for Cuba and the world, with a deep economic depression shaking the foundations of modern civilization and, in Cuba, hardship leading more to join

the struggle against Machado's increasingly brutal regime—to broaden his exposure to literature and ideas of all kinds, however remote and complex. Yet, as Lezama Lima biographers reveal, he did not intend to "isolate himself in an ivory tower but rather to find answers that would permit him to address his intellectual anxieties caused by death, discontinuity, and the dilemma between the occult and the profane."

**Resumed Studies and Significant Journalism**  
The university reopened in 1934, the year after Machado's overthrow, and Lezama Lima resumed his law studies—largely to please his mother—but he had come to the realization that his true interests lay elsewhere. In 1937, he published his most significant poem, "The Death of Narcissus," and began the publication of his first critical journal, *Verbum*. *Verbum* was intended to promote a national Cuban culture, but it failed after only six months. It was followed by a series of other publications on aesthetics, including *Spurs of Silver* (1939–1941), *No One's Opinion* (1942–1944), and *Originals* (1944–1956).

In 1941, two years into World War II (1939–1945), Lezama Lima published what for many is one of his best books of poetry, *Enemy Rumor*. The readers of these poems were few, but among them was the group subsequently known as the generation of *Orígenes* (*Originals*), consisting of poets, writers, and intellectuals who gathered around Lezama Lima as their central figure and who published or exhibited their artistic designs in the journal of the same name. During the war years and thereafter, Cuban internal politics remained messy and, frequently, dictatorial. In the late 1950s, agents of the Fulgencio Batista regime broke into Lezama Lima's house in an attempt to implicate him in radical activities.

**The Cuban Revolution and a Loss of Place** With the Cuban Revolution of 1959 led by Fidel Castro, however, his fortunes changed. The revolutionary forces triumphed, and Lezama Lima became a director of the department of literature and publications of the National Council of Culture. By the time he published the spiritual *Dador* in 1960, the revolution was being defined as Marxist, destined to affirm Karl Marx's assessment of religion as "the opium of the people." With his emphasis on negotiating a spiritual or mystical philosophy, Lezama Lima's place within an atmosphere so hostile to religion and spirituality would soon become difficult indeed. After years in which his relationship with the state was tense at times, he now found himself under attack by the artistic community itself.

Religion was not the only reason why Lezama Lima became a target for the revolutionary writers. They represented a new generation of poets, and, as such, they used politics to affirm themselves against the members of the *Orígenes* group, with Lezama Lima as its most representative figure. For these poets and writers, associated with the literary supplement of the newspaper *Mondays of*

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lezama Lima's famous contemporaries include:

**Jean Anouilh** (1910–1987): A prolific French playwright whose works range from absurdist to high drama.

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960): A French Algerian writer who was the second-youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature; while associated with existentialism, he actually rejected the title for, more accurately, "nihilism".

**Fidel Castro** (1926–): A Cuban political revolutionary and leader of Cuba from 1959 until his retirement in 2008.

**Ernst Jünger** (1895–1998): A German author who details his experiences as an officer during World War I in the memoir *Storm of Steel*.

**Vladimir Nabokov** (1899–1977): A Russian American novelist most famous for his extremely controversial novel *Lolita*.

*Revolution*, Lezama Lima embodied the elitist, bourgeois, politically uncommitted writer. In 1962 he also became an adviser to the Cuban Center for Literary Research, and to them his retreat into a literary ivory tower was unacceptable.

**International Fame and Disgrace at Home**  
Lezama Lima acquired international fame precisely during this same decade, which marked the beginning of crackdowns in Cuba that had not only intellectuals but also homosexuals as their main targets. Lezama Lima never publicly said whether he was homosexual. But, at a time when many homosexuals were being taken to labor camps, he published *Paradiso* (1966)—the eighth chapter of which offers an elaborate description of a homosexual encounter. Lezama Lima became the Cuban writer who achieved international fame with *Paradiso*, but he also suffered a miserable downturn of luck at the same time. Government functionaries classified the book as pornography because of its homosexual content, and in 1971 a former associate accused the writer of antirevolutionary activities. Lezama Lima did not leave Havana, but he did find his life increasingly restricted and suffered the pain of a loss of place in the literature of the country he loved.

Lezama Lima died in 1976, isolated from his friends and from the Cuban cultural life he had wanted to influence—and before he could finish the sequel to *Paradiso*. The incomplete novel was published in 1977 and was titled *Oppiano Licario* after its main character. Many more of Lezama Lima's writings have been published posthumously—including poems, essays, newspaper articles,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who also explored themes of angst, alienation, and the fall of humanity:

*The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a novel by J. D. Salinger. This novel is a cult classic because of the author's portrayal of its protagonist, the angst-ridden teenager Holden Caulfield.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a novel by Margaret Atwood. In this futuristic dystopian novel, Canadian author Atwood speculates on the impact of a horrifying future of gender division, reproductive control, and totalitarian takeover by a theocratic elite.

*His Dark Materials* (1995–2000), a trilogy of novels by Philip Pullman. In this trilogy, the author offers fantasy versions of the Christian notion of the fall of humanity that suggest instead a positive outcome for the fallen.

*Snow* (2005), a novel by Orhan Pamuk. In this work a clash of ideals is witnessed by a poet in exile as he comes to terms with his alienation through poetry and God.

letters, vignettes, conference presentations, and even notes. These subsequent publications give testimony to the fascination that Lezama Lima continues to inspire in his readers.

### Works in Literary Context

**A Poetic System, a Philosophy** It is no exaggeration to say that Lezama Lima's life was almost exclusively dedicated to literature and to the development of an elaborated poetic system. This poetic system represents a continuation of the tradition initiated by the Romantic poets. His system also reveals a series of philosophical influences: in his study of the poet, Emilio Bejel traces the legacy imprinted in Lezama Lima's works by Western thinkers and writers such as Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Valéry.

**Spiritual Bankruptcy and the Search for Answers** Scholar Emilio Bejel further discusses how Lezama Lima's poetic system is indebted to Western metaphysics, and how it builds on Blaise Pascal's ideas on the subject of fallen nature. According to Bejel, Lezama Lima's answer to the idea of a fallen nature—represented in his works by the death of the father—is the freedom of the poet/son who rejects imitation in favor of invention. Lezama Lima developed his system in an effort to find answers in poetry. These answers would alleviate a kind of crisis of the soul, one which began as a generalized feeling

of spiritual bankruptcy or emptiness typical among modern poets. The alienation felt by these poets was often experienced and expressed as a sentiment of the orphanhood that Friedrich Nietzsche described as accompanying "God's death."

In *Paradiso*, for instance, Lezama Lima penetrates his favorite topic, poetry itself, yet he also offers a sort of allegory to depict his exploration, using a series of sexual adventures in which the theme of incest is often present. This sexuality, marked by the incest taboo, gives the adventures their highly charged covert aspect and points to the angst of a poet in search of answers. The sexual energy of this and other pieces is part of why Lezama Lima's work exerted such a strong pull on the generation of Cuban writers who followed him, some—including Guillermo Cabrera Infante and Reinaldo Arenas—who saw themselves as not only admirers but also disciples.

### Works in Critical Context

Despite his untiring dedication to literature, for many years Lezama Lima was only known by a small group within Cuba's intellectual community. His tight style and the obscurity with which he conveyed his metaphysical concepts prevented this avant-garde writer from gaining popularity for almost three decades. However, he both enjoyed and suffered the consequences of international fame with the publication of his novel *Paradiso*.

**Paradiso** (1966) Lezama Lima brought together a lifetime's work as a literary critic and poet in his novelistic depiction of a young Cuban man's coming of age. In many ways *Paradiso* is an autobiographical novel. *Paradiso* provoked a scandal for the author, largely because of its unorthodox depiction of Cuban family life. For a time, attempts were made to ban the book and suppress Lezama Lima's work altogether. But the work also gained positive critical attention. In 1972 the Italian translation of *Paradiso* was selected as Italy's best Latin American book for the previous year. Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Octavio Paz have all acclaimed Lezama Lima's talent, calling him a master expounder of many of the principal themes of Latin American fiction. Because of *Paradiso* and all of his writings, Lezama Lima eventually came to be known as one of the writers of the "Boom," a publicity success experienced worldwide by Latin American literature during the 1960s. Octavio Paz recalls reading *Paradiso* "slowly, with increasing amazement and stupefaction," describing the novel as "a verbal edifice of incredible richness." Literary critic César Augusto Salgado, however, laments that "Paz's sense of wonderment has been difficult to replicate in translation," and writes that the English-speaking world's relative ignorance of Lezama Lima is particularly "regrettable since in great measure Lezama's exceptionality as a Cuban and Latin American writer lies in his persistent quest for 'universality.'"

## Responses to Literature

1. *Paradiso* models the structure of a bildungsroman—a novel of personal development and growth. Research several common characteristics of the bildungsroman. Which of these characteristics appear in *Paradiso*? In what ways, if any, does the novel differ from a typical bildungsroman?
2. Consider how your own life or the life of someone you know would make a fine bildungsroman. Trace the events and experiences that lead you or the person on a quest (even a short-term one), facing challenges that changed you or the person, and coming “home” to the society that now accepts you or the person you choose to write about. How did you or the other person grow? How did you mature to fit in with society?
3. Lezama Lima lived and wrote in a revolutionary time for Cuba. Research the Cuban Revolution of 1959. How did it impact civilians? How is this impact reflected in the poet’s work?
4. Scholars, such as Emilio Bejel, have pointed out Lezama Lima’s indebtedness to Western metaphysics. In debate with peers, justify Lezama Lima’s personal philosophy as depicted in *Paradiso*. Find examples from the text that can be associated with philosophical attitudes. How does the writer use images and symbols to express, for example, alienation or angst?

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## Federico García Lorca

BORN: 1898, Fuente Vaqueros, Granada, Spain

DIED: 1936, Viznar, Granada, Spain

NATIONALITY: Spanish

GENRE: Poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Gypsy Ballads* (1928)

*Blood Wedding* (1933)

*Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter, and Other Poems* (1935)

*Poet in New York* (1940)

### Overview

Federico García Lorca’s reputation rests equally on his poetry and his plays. He is widely regarded as Spain’s most distinguished twentieth-century writer. García Lorca was a major participant in the flowering of Spanish literature that occurred over the years between World War I and the Spanish Civil War, and he is normally categorized as a leading member of the group of artists known as the Generation of 1927.



Federico García Lorca Lorca, Federico García, photograph. AP Images.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Arabic Roots** García Lorca was born and raised in rural Andalusia, the southernmost province of Spain and a region greatly influenced by Arabic and Gypsy culture. The major points in García Lorca's life and career often seem to have coincided with significant events in the historical and political arena. For instance, the year of his birth coincided with the so-called Disaster of 1898, when Spain received a stunning double shock in losing the war against the United States and hence losing also its last remaining colonies: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. García Lorca spent his first eleven years on the *vega* (fertile plain) of Granada, to the west of the city, his family dividing its time between two villages, Fuente Vaqueros and Asquerosa. His father, Federico García Rodríguez, was a well-off farmer and landowner; García Lorca's mother, the former Vicenta Lorca Romero—his father's second wife—was a local primary-school teacher. Both parents, but particularly his mother, are thought to have exerted in their different ways a strong influence on García Lorca's character and sensibility. The loss of Cuba in the war meant that Spain's supply of sugar was cut off. The consequent boom in the market for sugar beets, which thrived in the *vega*'s soil, and his father's canny business sense enabled the family to consolidate its financial position, and hence, incidentally, to support García Lorca economically throughout almost the entirety of his life. He attended schools in the nearby town of Almería and studied law and literature at the University of Granada. After moving to Madrid in 1919, García Lorca continued his studies at the Residencia de Estudiantes, a center for writers, critics, and scholars of cultural liberalism.

**The Generation of 1927** While in Madrid, Lorca earned a law degree and came in contact with several emerging literary and artistic figures, many of whom would later comprise the Generation of 1927. The members of this group rejected what they considered to be the sentiment and superficiality of Romanticism and instead advocated hermetic expressionism. García Lorca's closest friend at the Residencia de Estudiantes was Salvador Dalí, whose dramatic surrealist paintings and "quest for joy for the sake of joy" would later inspire García Lorca to write "Ode to Salvador Dalí." Another prominent figure of this period was poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, whose use of symbolism influenced García Lorca's first volume of poetry, *Libro de poemas* (1921). This work is a compilation of Gypsy folklore García Lorca heard during his youth in Andalusia. Although considered a conventional account of his childhood experiences, *Libro de poemas* is recognized for its vivid, accessible language and mythological imagery. After the publication of this volume, García Lorca organized Spain's first *cante jondo* (deep song) festival. *Cante jondo* is a traditional form of

Andalusian music that, according to drama historian Felicia Hardison Londre, "combines intensely emotional yet stylistically spare poetry on themes of pain, suffering, love, and death with a primitive musical form." García Lorca's continued involvement in the *cante jondo* festival, at which Spain's most famous singers and guitarists performed, is reflected in *Canciones* (1927) and *Poema del cante jondo* (1931). These collections, which were directly inspired by composer Manuel de Falla, elevated the traditional ballad forms known as *siguiriyas gitano* and *solea* to new levels of stylization.

**The "Gypsy Poet"** The years 1924 to 1927 were also a time, after the closure of the *Poema del cante jondo/Canciones* phase, when García Lorca became engaged in a wide-ranging exploration of very different modes of poetic writing. One vein, or direction, is represented by what turned out to be García Lorca's most successful, most popular, and best-known collection of poetry, *Gypsy Ballads* (1928). The process of gestation was a fairly lengthy and leisurely one. While a primitive version of "Ballad of Don Pedro on Horse-back" dates back to late 1921, the concept of a series of Gypsy ballads and the composition of several of the poems can be ascribed to the summer of 1924. Others followed in subsequent years, and several appeared in small magazines (1926–1928) before the collection was completed in 1927 and published in mid-1928.

While not as well known as *Gypsy Ballads*, *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter, and Other Poems* (1935) is also considered a masterpiece. This four-part elegy was occasioned by the mauling death of Spain's most celebrated matador, Ignacio Sanchez Mejias, who was one of García Lorca's closest friends. A celebration of Spanish sound, rhythm, and assonance, *Lament* evidences García Lorca's unique blend of poetry and drama.

**Stereotypes and Industrial Life Provoke Poetic Crisis** Despite the fact that García Lorca's work was extremely popular throughout the 1920s, the poet suffered an emotional crisis in 1928, stemming from his belief that he was being stereotyped as a "gypsy poet." Leaving the Andalusian landscape with which he was so familiar, García Lorca traveled to New York City in 1929, where he came in contact with images directly contrasting those of his homeland. Deeply disturbed by the monotony of industrial life and America's reliance on mechanization, García Lorca began writing verse that was later collected in the posthumous volume *Poet in New York* (1940), considered to be his most abstract and surrealistic volume due to its themes of chaos and alienation.

Although García Lorca wrote the drama *The Spell of the Butterfly* in 1920, it was not until he returned to Spain in 1930, shortly after the proclamation of the Spanish Republic, that he composed the majority of his dramatic works. Among his best-known plays are *Blood*

*Wedding* (1933), *Yerma* (1935), and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1945).

**Tragic Passion** *Blood Wedding*, which closely resembles a classical Greek tragedy, is the story of a bride who runs off with another man on her wedding day. In contrast to *Blood Wedding* and the similar follow-up *Yerma*, which are generally considered expressionistic and abstract, *The House of Bernarda Alba* is intensely realistic. This work focuses on Bernarda, a tyrannical woman who virtually imprisons her five daughters in her home.

In 1936, an army coup against the government of the Second Spanish Republic resulted in the start of the Spanish Civil War, a three year conflict that resulted in the founding of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, a nationalist. The political unrest forced García Lorca into hiding, despite the fact he had never aligned himself with any particular political party and referred to himself as a “Catholic, communist, anarchist, liberal, conservative, and monarchist.” García Lorca was eventually discovered at the home of a friend and arrested by Franco’s Nationalists. García Lorca had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was well known as a man of the arts, liberal minded, rumored to be homosexual, a member of a family on intimate terms with socialist leader Fernando de los Ríos, and, therefore, as far as the opposing side was concerned, an enemy beyond a shadow of a doubt. After being detained by the civil government in Granada for several days, García Lorca was executed by a firing squad in an olive grove outside the tiny village of Viznar and buried in an unmarked grave. His murder is often considered a tragically ironic ending for an author who so frequently wrote about death. Scholars maintain, however, that although death is a prevalent theme in his works, García Lorca is perhaps more strongly esteemed for his abiding humanitarian concerns, deep affection for Andalusian culture and landscapes, and passionate dedication to all art forms.

### Works in Literary Context

García Lorca drew upon all elements of Spanish life and culture to create poetry at once traditional, modern, personal, and universal. Combining classical verse with folk and Gypsy ballads, García Lorca sought to liberate language from its structural constraints and bring out the musicality inherent in Spanish dialect. While initially influenced by the symbolists, who believed the function of poetry was to evoke and not describe, García Lorca began to experiment with startling imagery, scenic metaphors, and complex rhythms after coming in contact with filmmaker Luis Buñuel, poet Pablo Neruda, and artist Salvador Dalí. García Lorca’s dramatic approach to poetry led him to devote the latter part of his life to playwriting. In his drama, like his verse, García Lorca wrote about death, frustrated sexuality, and the relationship between dream and reality. While his poetry and

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

García Lorca’s famous contemporaries include:

**Luis Buñuel** (1900–1983): One of the most influential film directors of the twentieth century, Buñuel was a close friend of García Lorca and surrealist painter Salvador Dalí.

**Ricardo García López** (1890–1984): Known best by his pseudonym, K-Hito, López was a cartoonist, humorist, magazine publisher, and bullfighting critic closely associated with the Generation of 1927.

**Felipe Alfau** (1902–1999): Although associated with Spanish poets like García Lorca, Alfau wrote in English. His work is seen as a forerunner to postmodernist writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Thomas Pynchon.

**Miguel Hernández** (1910–1942): Spanish poet of modest upbringing, Hernández was arrested after the Spanish Civil War, eventually dying of tuberculosis in a jail cell at the age of thirty-two. He wrote extensively while in prison, and even scrawled his last poem on his cell wall as he lay dying: “Goodbye, brothers, comrades, friends: let me take my leave of the sun and the fields.”

**Francisco Franco** (1892–1975): Leader of the Nationalists during the Spanish Civil War, Franco would go on to become the dictator of Spain until his death nearly forty years later.

drama continue to be widely studied among literary scholars, García Lorca emphasized that he wrote for and about common people.

**New and Traditional Poetic Structures** By the time *Libro de poemas* was in the bookshops, García Lorca had already turned his back on the kind of writing it exemplified, focusing instead on a new manner that would absorb him for the next four or five years. He opted for short, often minimal lines, arranged in loosely structured patterns, often employing parallelism, repetition (sometimes with internal variation), exclamations, unanswered questions, and ellipses; the resulting short poems were arranged in thematically grouped sequences he called suites. By contrast, the eighteen poems of the *Gypsy Ballads* are all written in the traditional octosyllabic (eight syllables per line) ballad meter, whose origins go back at least as far as the fourteenth century and which had been perpetuated in a continuous oral tradition down to García Lorca’s times.

García Lorca, along with the other members of the Generation of 1927, played an influential role bridging the gap between classical Spanish literary tradition and the European avant-gardes that came after him.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

García Lorca's so-called rural trilogy of plays—*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*—all touched upon death and rebellion against society's restrictions, often featuring women as both protagonists and antagonists, always with tragic results. Similar dramatic works include:

*Antigone*, (fifth century BCE), a play by Sophocles. This work, an ancient Greek tragedy, follows the moral dilemma of a woman who acts against the will of the state, which has declared her deceased brother not be granted a funeral.

*A Doll's House* (1879), a play by Henrik Ibsen. Highly controversial when first written and performed, this work catapulted Ibsen to international fame (and infamy) on the strength of its sharp criticism of the traditional roles of men and women in the nineteenth century and, in particular, the institution of marriage.

*Pygmalion* (1913), a play by George Bernard Shaw. Shaw transforms an ancient myth into a modern story about a professor who turns a Cockney flower girl into a proper society lady.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a play by Tennessee Williams. Known for his taut portraits of families in crisis, this work is perhaps Williams's best-known work—a drama of elemental passions in which a vibrant couple is challenged by the arrival and decline of an unstable heroine.

because it shows not only that the outlook of a highly civilized poet is in many ways that of the simplest men and women, but that the new devices which have been invented to express a modern sensibility are not restricted to urban and sophisticated subjects." Although *The Gypsy Ballads* brought García Lorca widespread acclaim, it also led both readers and critics to categorize him as a "gypsy poet," a label García Lorca would repudiate throughout his life: "Gypsies are a theme. Nothing more. I would be the same poet if I wrote about sewing needles or hydraulic landscapes. Besides, the gypsy myth makes me sound like an uncultured, uneducated, *primitive poet*, which . . . I am not," he once explained.

### Responses to Literature

1. García Lorca has been called "the poet of the Gypsies." Citing specific examples from his work, describe the aspects of García Lorca's writing that earned him that label.
2. Choose one of García Lorca's plays and analyze the themes, beliefs, and customs contained within. What can the play tell you about Spanish culture? What can the play tell you about García Lorca's political beliefs and the political climate of Spain in the 1920s and 1930s?
3. García Lorca was associated with the symbolist movement. Identify and discuss the symbolist elements of García Lorca's writings.
4. The chorus in Greek tragedies is echoed in García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. Research the ancient Greek chorus and compare it with García Lorca's chorus in the play. Which elements are the same? Which are different?

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### Works in Critical Context

It has been argued that García Lorca's untimely death at the hands of a firing squad, some five weeks after the outbreak of civil war, transformed him into a martyr figure for antifascists from all around Europe. Be this as it may, his enduring and increasing popularity and the richness and profundity of his works show that his status as a modern classic has a sound foundation.

***The Gypsy Ballads*** García Lorca's *The Gypsy Ballads* (1928) is widely regarded as a masterpiece of Spanish poetry. In this volume, composed of eighteen poems written between 1924 and 1927, García Lorca incorporated images of Gypsy village life with traditional ballad forms to create verse both thematically accessible and lyrically complex. Utilizing such dramatic elements as action, characterization, and dialogue, García Lorca created what Londre described as "symbolist dramas in miniature." Since its publication, *The Gypsy Ballads* has been popular in Spanish-speaking countries worldwide due to its focus on common people and its use of idiomatic language. C. M. Bowra explained: "[*The Gypsy Ballads*] is a book which has a special place in our time

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## John Lyly

BORN: C. 1552, England

DIED: 1606, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction, drama, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*(1578)

*Euphues and His England*(1580)

*Pappe with an Hatchet, Alias, a Fig for my Godson*(1589)

*Campaspe*(1583–1584)

### Overview

Together with Christopher Marlowe, John Lyly was one of the most important pre-Shakespearean playwrights of the Elizabethan stage. Lyly was a member of the school of writing called the "University Wits," and the publication of his prose work, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit* (1578) marked the beginning of his literary career, made him a best-selling author, and afforded him a reputation as one of the most prominent prose writers of the era.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**An Oxford Education** John Lyly was born to Peter Lyly, a minor church official serving the archbishopric of York, and his wife Jane. The exact date and place of his birth are unknown, but records of his years at Oxford University suggest that he was born between 1552 and 1554. By 1562 he evidently resided with his parents and a growing number of siblings in Canterbury.

Like his father and grandfather before him, John Lyly attended Magdalen College at Oxford University. However, remarks Anthony à Wood, who reported in

*Athenae Oxonienses* (1691–1692), Lyly was "always averse to the crabbed studies of logic and philosophy. For so it was that his genie being naturally bent to the pleasant paths of poetry . . . did in a manner neglect academical studies." Wood's testimony is suspect because he wrote at least one hundred years after Lyly's university career and was perhaps influenced by Lyly's more spectacular later career at court, but his remark about the "crabbed studies" certainly conforms to Lyly's own criticism of his alma mater and points to Lyly's developing his writing.

**Hoping for a Sure, High Seat at Court** After receiving his bachelor of arts degree and then taking his master's at Oxford in June 1575, Lyly settled in London. Being disappointed in his pursuit of a fellowship, he apparently decided to pursue advancement at the other venue open to educated gentlemen—the court.

**A Turn from Drama to Prose Ensures Literary Success** In 1578, Lyly joined the household of the Earl of Oxford, one of Queen Elizabeth I's favorites who served as Lord Great Chamberlain for a time. It was for Oxford's players at Blackfriars theater that Lyly wrote most of his plays, including *Endimion*, *Campaspe*, *Sapho and Phao*, and *Gallatea*. But it was the publication of his prose work, *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit*, that marked the beginning of his literary career.

The extraordinary success of *Euphues* persuaded Lyly that there were other avenues to advancement, and he turned again to his fictional hero in *Euphues and His England*, which was not published until 1580 despite promising a sequel "within one summer." Lyly completely transformed his story, his tone, and his sense of audience for the later work; the results were apparently worth his efforts, for the two *Euphues* books were reprinted at an astonishing rate, and imitators were eagerly jumping on the bandwagon. Equally notable is how Lyly's second *Euphues* book, with its extravagant patriotism and its lavish praise of Queen Elizabeth in the dedications, secured Lyly's position as court entertainer. Lyly left the Earl of Oxford's service about 1588. Soon thereafter he obtained a court position as a writer in the Revels office—though he never succeeded in advancing to the more important post of Master of the Revels.

**An Anti-Puritan Propagandist** In 1589 Lyly was also apparently engaged as a reader of new books for the Bishop of London. In *John Lyly* (1905), J. Dover Wilson remarks, "This connexion with the censorship of the day is interesting, as showing how Lyly was drawn into the whirlpool of the *Marprelate* controversy." The scandalous *Marprelate* pamphlets were fliers written under the pseudonym Martin *Marprelate* by radical Puritans making attacks on the clerical hierarchy of the established church. The bishops enlisted writers such as Lyly and Thomas Nashe to try to defeat "Martin *Marprelate*" at "his" own

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Lyly's famous contemporaries include:

- Miguel de Cervantes** (1547–1616): A Spanish novelist and poet who wrote what is widely considered the first novel, and is certainly one of the most important literary works in history: *Don Quixote: Man of La Mancha* (1605).
- Galileo Galilei** (1564–1642): An Italian physicist, mathematician, philosopher, and astronomer who was instrumental in the scientific revolution.
- Ben Jonson** (1532–1637): An English playwright, poet, and actor considered to be one of the most influential writers on the Jacobean and Caroline literature that followed him.
- Mary Queen of Scots** (1542–1587): The Queen of the Monarchy of Scotland, she was also queen consort in France and is best known for her imprisonment and execution for treason.
- William Shakespeare** (1564–1616): An English (Elizabethan) playwright and poet, he is generally seen as one of the greatest writers of all time.

game. The result in Lyly's case was *Pappe with an Hatchet, Alias, a Fig for my Godson* (1589).

With *Pappe*, Lyly's career as a prose writer came to an end. The only other writings outside of his dramatic works are his famous petitionary letters to Queen Elizabeth of 1598 and 1601. Elizabeth had apparently led Lyly to believe that he was going to be granted the reversion of the post of Master of the Revels, but the position was instead given to Sir George Buc. Lyly was beside himself with disappointment and frustration, and wrote lifelong letters of appeal that apparently did little to advance his position. This rejection, combined with the decline in favor of his books (which were being neglected as intensely as they had been snatched up, read, and imitated), must have had a sore impact on the writer so eager to advance.

**Parliament, a Prize Marriage, and Penury in the Last Days** It was probably through his friends at court, however, that Lyly was seated in Parliament four times—in 1589, 1593, 1597, and 1601; and as G. K. Hunter rightly points out, “membership in Parliament was an honour that few Elizabethan writers achieved.” It was also probably through his connections at court that Lyly met and married, in 1593, Beatrice Browne, an heiress whom Hunter characterizes as “quite a prize in the marriage market for the Canterbury registrar’s son.”

Nevertheless, by the time Lyly died in 1606, heavily in debt, unrewarded by the court he had tried so hard to

serve in his own way, and “all but ignored by the literary world which earlier had acclaimed him as its brightest star,” as Joseph Houppert writes in *John Lyly* (1975), it is hard to imagine him looking back on his life without a measure of disappointment and regret.

### Works in Literary Context

Lyly is considered a pioneer of English literature who helped make prose a vehicle of art on the same level with poetry. He was especially noted for his artificial, elaborate prose style. Contrasted greatly with his contemporary Christopher Marlowe's bloody tragedies, Lyly's dramatic comedies marked an important change in English drama, mixing the pastoral tradition of lyric poetry with elements of classical myth.

**Euphuism, or Latin in English** *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit* is perhaps more accurately remembered for its inflated language known as *euphuism*, a highly artificial style adopted from Latin prose and never before attempted in English. Despite the disdain euphuism produced after its initial popularity, Lyly's use of language was a positive influence on the language: His alliteration, punning, and frequent references to Greek and Roman classical literature, for instance, attained great popularity in the pre-Shakespearean Elizabethan court. He heavily influenced writers in his time, who were eager to imitate him, as well as later writers including Shakespeare himself.

**The Theater of Ideas** Lyly's dramas also influenced later playwrights. Not only did he continue to use the euphuistic style he had originated in his first prose, but he helped introduce a theater of ideas to the English court. In *Campaspe*, for instance, the action of the play is both minimal and predictable. This is because the conflict centers not on the action of the play itself but on the questions that the protagonists have to consider to bring the conflict to a close. The primary female character, Campaspe, is loved by the heroic warrior Alexander and the painter Apelles. The conflict—who will get Campaspe in the end—is resolved when Alexander gives her up to Apelles, but in the process other ideas are introduced: Alexander returns to warfare, which had earlier been criticized, and he renounces Campaspe in scornful, unheroic terms after some serious soul-searching.

### Works in Critical Context

Lyly's *Euphues* books earned both praise and dismissal in his lifetime. They pioneered an influential writing style, but they also garnered Lyly rejection and a poor reputation within years of his writing them—a critical backlash that may have played a role in frustrating Lyly's hopes for a high position at court.

**The Euphues Books** From the books' title and character name, Euphues, Lyly's adversary Gabriel Harvey coined the term *euphuism*. This new word was and has been a term of great disapproval or even disgust for most

of the four hundred years of its existence. In 1887 critic George Saintsbury characterized it as “eccentric and tasteless.” In 1890 critic J. J. Jusserand called Lyly’s style “immoderate, prodigious, monstrous.” Much later, C. S. Lewis described Euphues as a “monstrosity” and a “fatal success.” As Walter N. King more recently asserted, “Lyly has...become a major whipping boy in English literature.”

The decline in popularity of the Euphues books that began so abruptly in his own lifetime has continued to a large extent to the present day. Even those who succeed in reading the first volume are rarely motivated to proceed to the sequel. Yet the current fascination with Elizabethan power politics of courtship and patronage (and the writing style strategies those politics demanded) would suggest that Lyly is ripe for reassessment.

## Responses to Literature

1. Euphuism—a sophisticated and ornate prose style—originated with John Lyly. The writing was highly technical, with a set structure the author popularized to the point of influencing Shakespeare. Consider the following Lyly techniques, and compare a Lyly work or passage with a Shakespeare work or passage. Where can you identify similarities? What characteristics of the writing do you surmise Shakespeare “imitated”?

In Euphuism:

- There is a distinctive pattern.
  - There is a strict balance.
  - A line will have two phrases of equal length, and the phrases will match in grammar or sentence structure but not in meaning.
  - A line will have a matching of sounds and syllables—using such devices as alliteration (matching consonant sounds) or assonance (matching vowel sounds).
2. Both of Lyly’s Euphues works were hugely popular when they were first published. In both style and content they depicted the intellectual preferences and favored themes of Renaissance society. Considering the Euphues works, how would you characterize their first readers? What can you deduce about sixteenth-century tastes, values, and desires? What was important to Renaissance men and women?
  3. Given the unique style of Lyly’s euphuism, find one passage you see as particularly striking, and try to imitate Lyly’s style. The theme can be the same or you can devise your own. Include at least one Lyly characteristic, such as alliteration or assonance. Then, “modernize” the piece by writing in your own style, as you would write a poem or lines of dialogue today for your modern audience. How do the two styles compare? How are they different? What does this tell

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Lyly was known for his playful comedies that showed off the linguistic cleverness of his characters. Here are a few works by other writers that also mix comedy with clever language:

*As You Like It* (1599–1600), a play by William Shakespeare. In this pastoral comedy, double (or even triple) disguises make way for gender reversals and several humorous misconceptions and mishaps.

*Barrel Fever* (1994), a collection of short stories and essays by David Sedaris. In this selection of humorous stories and essays, the author offers laughs by way of his department store elf, obsessive-compulsive disordered child, and other pitifully hilarious alter egos.

*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1981), a novel by Italo Calvino. This novel is a comedy, a tragedy, and a thoughtful and thought-provoking experience.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a play by Oscar Wilde. In this comedy of manners, the dialogue is bristling with irony, sarcasm, and social puns.

you about audience preferences in Renaissance times and audience preferences today?

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# M

## Niccolò Machiavelli

BORN: 1469, Florence, Italy

DIED: 1527, Florence, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Political theory, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*  
(1513–1517)

*The Prince* (1513)

*Mandragola* (1518)

*The Art of War* (1520)

*The Life of Castruccio Castracani* (1520)

### Overview

As a Florentine statesman, political philosopher, theorist, and playwright of the Italian Renaissance, Machiavelli addressed a wide range of political and historical topics while embracing strictly literary forms in his various publications. He came to be identified almost exclusively with the realist political theory that he described in *The Prince* (1513), which is basically a pragmatic guidebook for obtaining, and preserving, political power. Critics have long pointed out the incongruities between the republican philosophy that Machiavelli professed in *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (1513–1517)—that nations should be republics guided by the principles of liberty, rule of law, and civic virtue—and the philosophy he described in *The Prince*, which has been variously hailed, denounced, and distorted as advocating an ends-justify-the-means approach to politics. His perspective in *The Prince*, in particular, quickly gave rise to the term *Machiavellian*: deceiving and manipulating others for personal gain.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

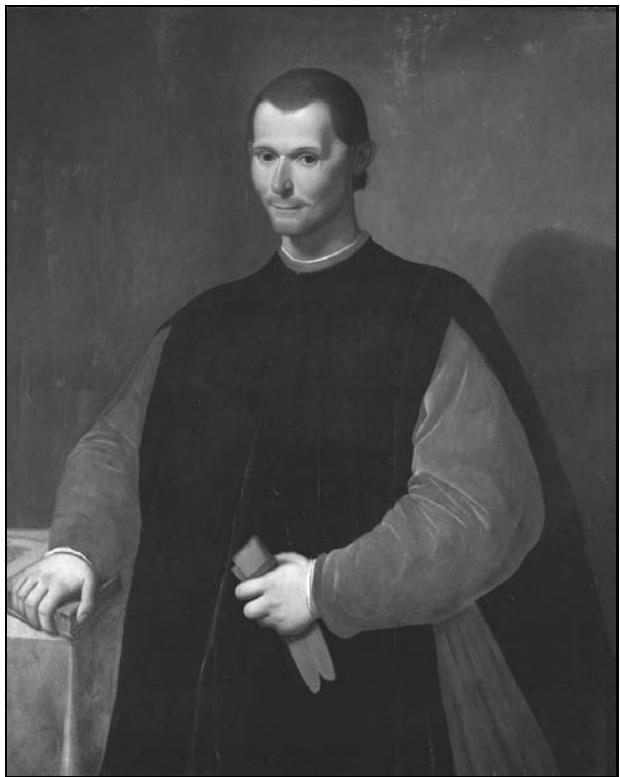
Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469, in Florence, Italy, to an established middle-class family whose members had

traditionally filled responsible positions in local government. While little of the author's early life has been documented, it is known that as a boy he learned Latin and quickly became a dedicated reader of the ancient classics.

Machiavelli lived during the height of the Italian Renaissance, a “rebirth” of the arts and sciences that rivaled the accomplishments of the ancient Romans and Greeks. During this time, an interest in classical subjects and techniques became popular, as shown in the art of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. This interest in classical ideas is also reflected in the work of Machiavelli, who wrote much in support of the idea of republican government first developed by Plato.

Machiavelli's first recorded involvement in the complicated political scene in Florence occurred in 1498, when he helped the political faction that replaced the dominant religious and political figures in Florence at the time. That same year, Machiavelli began acting as secretary to a sensitive government agency that dealt chiefly with warfare and foreign affairs. Machiavelli participated both in Italian politics and in diplomatic missions to foreign governments. He quickly gained political prominence and influence, so that by 1502 he had become a well-respected assistant to the republican head of state. His posts afforded him many opportunities over the next fourteen years to closely examine the inner workings of government and to meet prominent individuals, including Cesare Borgia, who became Machiavelli's major model for leadership in *The Prince*.

**Imprisonment and the Medici Family** In 1512, Spanish forces invaded Italy, and the Florentine political climate changed abruptly. The Medici family—for centuries the rulers of Florence but exiled since 1494—seized the opportunity to depose the head of state and replace the elected government with their own regime. Machiavelli was removed from office, jailed, and tortured for his well-known republican sentiments. He was finally banished to his country residence in Percussina, Italy. Machiavelli spent his forced retirement writing the small body of political works that would ensure his literary immortality. Between



Niccolò Machiavelli Imagno / Getty Images

1513 and 1517, he completed *Discourses upon the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* and *The Prince*, neither of which was published until after Machiavelli's death.

Around 1518, Machiavelli turned from nonfiction to drama, writing *Mandragola* (1518). The play was popular with audiences throughout much of Italy for several years. His next effort, a military treatise published in 1521 and titled *The Art of War*, was the only historical or political work published during his lifetime. Meanwhile, Machiavelli had made several attempts to gain favor with the Medici, including dedicating *The Prince* to Lorenzo. In 1520 he was appointed official historian of Florence and entrusted with minor governmental duties. His prodigious *History of Florence* (1532) carefully dilutes his republican platform with the Medicean bias expected of him. In 1525 Pope Clement VII recognized his achievements with a monetary stipend. Two years later, the Medicis were again ousted, but Machiavelli's hopes for advancement under the revived republic were frustrated, for the new government was suspicious of his ties to the former ruling family. Disheartened by his country's internal strife, Machiavelli fell ill in 1527 and died a disillusioned man, his dream of an operational republic unrealized.

### Works in Literary Context

Up to Machiavelli's time, other political theorists had masked issues of leadership in vague diplomatic terms in

their writings. Machiavelli presented his theses in direct, candid, and often passionate speech, using metaphors and examples that readers could easily understand. He was, in many ways, a superb propagandist, convincing others to accept his perspectives through well-turned exaggerated phrases, polished language, and masterly composition.

**Pragmatism and the Nature of Mankind** Two philosophical perspectives guided almost all of Machiavelli's writings: political pragmatism—or real-world practicality, free of wishful thinking—and the idea that people are fundamentally flawed with selfishness. Unlike what so many detractors have claimed, however, Machiavelli's plans for obtaining and maintaining power were not wholly evil. He placed some limited restrictions on bad actions, including the idea that cruelty must be swift, effective, and short-lived.

Until Machiavelli, writers, thinkers, and philosophers typically had a Christian view of history, attributing political actions to an omnipotent divine power. Machiavelli had a much more worldly perspective, believing in humanity's capacity for determining its own destiny. Fundamental to his understanding of history and politics, therefore, were concepts that had nothing to do with religion: *fortuna* and *virtù*. *Fortuna*, or fortune, gave or took away a political leader's opportunity for decisive action. Bad luck, Machiavelli thought, could sometimes undermine even the most brilliant leaders. Similarly, *virtù* in politics was nothing like Christian virtue. For Machiavelli, it meant having an effective combination of force and cleverness, as well as a touch of greatness. Leaders who had this characteristic and who were also smiled on by *fortuna*, Machiavelli argued, had the best chance of remaining in power.

It is not clear precisely when or how Machiavelli developed his notions about politics, but it is assumed that he was influenced in his youth primarily by his reading of Livy's history of the Roman Republic and later by his own observations. What is better known, however, is the extensive influence his work had on later writers. Some 395 direct references can be found to Machiavelli in Elizabethan literature, including the work of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, and the literature of the 1600s is steeped in his philosophy and what his philosophy came to represent. The authors and playwrights John Webster, Philip Massinger, John Ford, John Marston, Cyril Tourneur, and Thomas Middleton are all so heavily indebted to him, either in the form of revulsion or delight, that they could be called the children of Machiavelli.

**Influence on Political Science** Primarily on the strength of the *Discourses* and *The Prince*, Machiavelli has been called the founder of empirical (observation-based) political science, having a noticeable influence on the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon and on the thought of such modern political theorists as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Georges Sorel, and Robert Michels. While *The Prince* receives by far the majority of attention from scholars and critics,

Machiavelli's *Discourses*, in particular, had an influence and significance as an early treatise on republicanism. But precisely how significant Machiavelli's political thinking was for the development of modern republicanism remains controversial. Some contemporary scholars nevertheless argue that he was an important contributor to the emergence of liberal ideas of freedom and civic virtue in England and the United States through his influence on such thinkers as Marchmont Nedham, James Harrington, John Locke, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, David Hume, the baron de Montesquieu, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton.

### Works in Critical Context

Throughout the centuries, Machiavelli has been loathed by some critics and loved by others. His works leave plenty of room for personal interpretation, inviting multiple perspectives. Most often, criticism of Machiavelli's ideas are bound up with criticism of the actions of people or characters who hold them, and they are not necessarily always the same thing.

Reaction to *The Prince* was initially—but only briefly—favorable. Catherine de' Medici was said to have enthusiastically included it, among others of Machiavelli's writings, in the education of her children, but the book quickly fell into widespread disfavor, becoming viewed as a handbook for atheistic tyranny. *The Prince*, and Machiavelli's other writings, were placed on the pope's Index of Prohibited Books in 1559. Toward the close of the sixteenth century, the influential Innocenzo Gentillet held *The Prince* responsible for French political corruption and for widespread contribution to any number of political and moral vices. Gentillet's interpretation of *The Prince* circulated throughout Britain and influenced Shakespeare and Marlowe. In the prologue to Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (circa 1589), "Machevil" addresses the audience at length, at one point typifying the Elizabethan perception of Machiavelli by saying, "I count religion but a childish toy, / And hold there is no sin but ignorance." Here, and in the works of Marlowe's contemporaries, Machiavelli was depicted as an agent of all that Protestant England despised in Catholic Italy.

One seventeenth-century commentator, philosopher Pierre Bayle, went against the trend and found it strange that "there are so many people, who believe, that Machiavel teaches princes dangerous politics; for on the contrary princes have taught Machiavelli what he has written." Since Bayle's time, further analysis has prompted the most prolonged and animated discussion relating to the work: the true intent of its creator. Was the treatise, as Bayle suggested, a faithful representation of unethical princely conduct that might justify its historian as a simple truth-teller? Or had Machiavelli, in his manner of lively presentation, written the book to promote his own opinions? A single conclusion about the author's motive has not been drawn, although patterns have certainly emerged in the history of Machiavelli criticism.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Machiavelli's famous contemporaries include:

**Lorenzo de' Medici** (1449–1492): This diplomat, politician, and patron of scholars, artists, and poets was a leading member of the ruling Medici family in Florence, Italy, during the Italian Renaissance.

**Vasco da Gama** (1469–1524): This Portuguese explorer was among the most successful in the European Age of Discovery. He commanded the first ships to sail directly from Europe to India.

**Michelangelo** (1475–1564): A famous Italian Renaissance painter, sculptor, architect, poet, and engineer best known for his sculpture of the biblical king David, his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and his paintings on the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

**Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519): This scientist, mathematician, engineer, inventor, anatomist, sculptor, architect, botanist, musician, and writer was also one of the greatest painters of all time (most famous for the *Mona Lisa*) and is often considered to have been the model "Renaissance man": someone who can do many different kinds of things with equal excellence.

**Christopher Columbus** (1451–1506): Italian navigator, colonizer, and explorer who was instrumental in the Spanish colonization of the Americas.

**Sandro Botticelli** (1444–1510): Italian painter of the Florentine school during the early Renaissance and best known for his masterpieces *The Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*.

For sheer volume and intensity, studies of *The Prince* have far exceeded those directed at Machiavelli's *Discourses*, though the latter work has been acknowledged as an essential companion piece to the former. All of the author's subsequent studies treating history, political science, and military theory stem from this voluminous dissertation containing his most original thoughts. Less flamboyant than *The Prince* and narrower in its margin for interpretation, the *Discourses* contains Machiavelli's undisguised admiration for ancient governmental forms, and his most eloquent, thoroughly explicated republicanism.

So long as the means and ends of politics are seen to be at odds, people will be discussing Machiavelli. By and large, commentators have come to weigh the integrity of Machiavelli's controversial thought against the pressing political conditions that formed it. Some scholars, like Roberto Ridolfi, have endeavored to dislodge the long-standing perception of Machiavelli as a ruthless character: "In judging Machiavelli one must...take account of his anguished despair of virtue and his tragic sense of evil.... [On] the basis of sentences taken out of context and of outward appearances he was judged a cold and cynical

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Machiavelli will forever be associated with political maneuvering. Here are some other works that deal with power politics.

*Arthashastra* (most likely the fourth century BCE), a political treatise by Chanakya. This is an ancient treatise of political realism on statecraft, economic policy, and military strategy, disclosing to a king what calculating and sometimes brutal measures he must carry out to preserve the state and the common good. The author was known as the Indian Machiavelli.

*Richard III* (1597), a play by William Shakespeare. In this powerful drama, Shakespeare's Richard III stops at nothing to gain the throne.

*Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (2005), a memoir by Otto von Bismarck. This multivolume collection of nineteenth-century German chancellor Bismarck's writings reveal a political mind as subtle and hard as Machiavelli's.

man, a sneerer at religion and virtue; but in fact there is hardly a page of his writing and certainly no action of life that does not show him to be passionate, generous, ardent and basically religious."

### Responses to Literature

1. How can Machiavelli's concept of war be understood as an art?
2. Where do you draw the ethical line when it comes to attaining power and maintaining it? Do the ends always justify the means?
3. Describe the ideal qualities of Machiavelli's leader as represented in *The Prince*. Are many, few, or all of these ideals shared by successful politicians today?
4. What are the stereotypes that have been assigned to Machiavelli, and what are their sources and motivations?

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## ■ Alistair Stuart MacLean

BORN: 1922, Glasgow, Scotland

DIED: 1987, Munich, West Germany

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*HMS Ulysses* (1955)

*The Guns of Navarone* (1957)

*Ice Station Zebra* (1963)

*Where Eagles Dare* (1967)

*Bear Island* (1971)

### Overview

Despite being one of the world's best-selling writers, Alistair MacLean was consistently modest about the literary merits of his twenty-eight novels of action and adventure. He always insisted that he was a storyteller rather than a novelist, and he felt great regret that he had never written what he regarded as a "good" book. MacLean was, however, proud of his ability to create fast-moving, exciting action-adventure stories.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Gaelic Beginnings** Alistair Stuart MacLean was born on April 28, 1922, in Glasgow, Scotland. He was the third of four children born to Alistair, a Church of Scotland minister, and Mary Lamont MacLean, a prize-winning singer. Soon after Alistair's birth, the family moved to the country district of Daviot, six miles south of Inverness. The MacLeans were Gaelic speakers. At his father's insistence, Alistair did not learn English until he was seven and spoke only Gaelic at home until the age of fifteen. He was educated at the local primary school in Daviot.

In 1936, when Alistair was fourteen, his father died. By this time both his older brothers had left home, one to study medicine and one to serve in the merchant marine fleet. Mary MacLean moved back to Glasgow in the spring of



Alistair MacLean with his wife Marcelle Georgeus D. Morrison / Express / Getty Images

1937 with Alistair and his younger brother, Gillespie. Alistair obtained a bursary to Hillhead High School in Glasgow.

**Maritime Work and the Theater of War** To support his widowed mother, MacLean left school and took a job at a shipping firm in the summer of 1939, just before the start of World War II. In 1941 MacLean enlisted in the Royal Navy. After initial training, he became a leading torpedo operator on the HMS *Royalist*, an escort ship for convoys taking supplies to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), one of the Allied Powers. MacLean fictionalized his experiences vividly in his first novel, *HMS Ulysses* (1955). The *Royalist* served in the Mediterranean and the Aegean, taking part in the 1944 bombardment of shore targets on Nazi-occupied Greek islands. MacLean used this experience as source material for his second novel, *The Guns of Navarone* (1957), and its sequel, *Force 10 from Navarone* (1968). In 1945 the *Royalist* was sent to the Far East, playing an important part in the liberation of Singapore. This theater of war provided the background for MacLean's third novel, *South by Java Head* (1958).

**School and Marriage** World War II ended in 1945, shortly after the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. On March 26, 1946, MacLean was officially released from the Royal Navy and, like many war veterans, went back into civilian life. In the autumn of 1946 he began to study English literature at Glasgow University, supporting himself by working in a post office and sweeping streets. He earned a second-class honors degree and graduated with a master of arts degree in 1950.

During the summer of 1949, MacLean worked as a hospital porter at the King George V Sanatorium in Surrey, where he met his future wife, Gisela Heinrichsen. They married on July 2, 1953. Gisela might have provided the inspiration for one of MacLean's later heroines, Helene Fleming of *Night Without End* (1960).

**From Educator to Writer** By the time of his marriage, MacLean had a secure job as a teacher of English, history, and geography at Gallowflat Secondary School in Rutherglen, south of Glasgow. His pupils recall him as a good teacher, although MacLean later said that he did not enjoy the work and had taken the job because it was

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

MacLean's famous contemporaries include:

**Benjamin Creme** (1922–): British painter, author, esotericist, and lecturer who champions the second coming not of Jesus Christ but of Maitreya (the new Buddha).

**Jean-Luc Godard** (1930–): French and Swiss filmmaker best known for being one of the pioneers of the French New Wave.

**Norman Lear** (1922–): American television writer and producer who has become a legend for producing such iconic shows as *All in the Family* and *Maude*.

**Nathalie Sarraute** (1900–1999): Russian Jewish lawyer and writer of French literature, better known as one of the pioneers of the *nouveau roman* style of writing.

**Adolf Hitler** (1889–1945): German politician and leader of the Nazi Party; he is most famous for precipitating World War II, which included the genocide of approximately 6 million Jewish people in addition to other casualties.

“the logical thing to do with an honours degree in English.” Meanwhile, MacLean had begun writing in his spare time. In 1954 his short story “The Cruise of the Golden Girl” was published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*.

**A Turn for the Better** MacLean’s career took a dramatic turn for the better. In March 1954 he won first prize in a short-story competition run by the *Glasgow Herald* with his story “The Dileas.” Not only did the prize money enhance his teacher’s income, but it led to MacLean’s being sought out by a publisher eager to put more of his work into print. Ian Chapman, who worked for the Glasgow publishing firm Collins, found his wife crying over MacLean’s story in the *Glasgow Herald*. Intrigued, he read “The Dileas” himself and sought out its author. Chapman met MacLean several times during the spring and summer of 1954 and urged him to write a novel. Although initially reluctant, MacLean began to write *HMS Ulysses* in September of 1954, shortly after the birth of his first son, Lachlan. A mere ten weeks later he presented Chapman with the finished manuscript. Chapman’s initial reaction was that “he’s written so fast it can’t possibly be any good.” He changed his mind as soon as he read it, however, and gave MacLean a sizeable advance, becoming MacLean’s publisher and lifelong friend.

**Phenomenal Success** *HMS Ulysses* was published in September of 1955. By spring of 1956 it had sold a quarter of a million copies. Motion picture rights were sold, an American edition was published (1956), and serial rights were sold to the popular British magazine *Picture Post*. *HMS Ulysses* became one of the best-selling

British novels of the twentieth century. Encouraged by the novel’s phenomenal success, MacLean began a second book, *The Guns of Navarone*. Yet ever cautious, MacLean kept his job as a schoolteacher, being uncertain as to whether the success of his first book was just a fluke. He need not have worried: *The Guns of Navarone* (1957) was also a resounding success. In addition to astounding book sales, in 1961 *The Guns of Navarone* was made into a highly successful movie starring Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn, and David Niven.

**Giving up Writing** The blockbuster success of his first two novels prompted MacLean to give up teaching and become a full-time writer. To escape England’s punitive tax system, he and his family moved to Switzerland before the publication of his third novel, *South by Java Head*, in 1958. From this time onward MacLean usually wrote a novel per year, several of which were to be adapted for film—including, among others, *Ice Station Zebra* (1963; made into a film in 1968).

With the completion of *Ice Station Zebra* in 1963, however, MacLean announced his decision to give up writing and become a hotelier. He had become disillusioned with writing and was sure that owning property would be a “more worthwhile occupation.” He returned to England, moved to Cornwall, and bought the famous Jamaica Inn (known for being a base for pirates and smugglers in the eighteenth century). MacLean felt “more in contact with real life in one hour [selling trinkets in the Jamaica’s souvenir shop] than during nine years of writing novels.”

The hotel project proved a disaster, and MacLean lost a good deal of money. He found writing had become “attractive again.” He continued to produce best sellers, including *Bear Island* (1971), published a year after he and the family moved to the Villa Murat, near the Swiss village of Celigny. By that year, MacLean’s books had sold 23 million copies, earning him millions of pounds. He was one of the world’s highest-paid novelists.

**Divorce and Declining Years** In 1972 MacLean divorced Gisela and married Marcelle Georgeus, a French movie executive and former actress. The marriage was not a happy one. By the time of the publication of *Breakheart Pass* in 1974, MacLean was losing a long-term struggle with alcoholism. Whether alcoholism is to blame is not known, but by the mid-1970s MacLean’s creativity was beginning to suffer. Literary critics found his plots to be implausible and his dialogue stilted or melodramatic.

In January 1987 MacLean suffered a series of strokes and collapsed while on a visit to Munich. He was rushed to a hospital, but nothing could be done to save him. He died on February 2, 1987, and was buried near Gisela’s home in Celigny. MacLean’s obituary in the *Scotsman* summed up his achievement: “He wrote books to make air journeys tolerable and to take people out of themselves for a few hours. He did it very well...he gave countless hours of pleasure to millions of people. There are worse epitaphs.”

## Works in Literary Context

MacLean's brief, first-person narrative style owed something to the writing of Raymond Chandler, whose works he greatly admired. While his first four novels relied on third-person narrative, starting with *Night Without End* (1960), he began using a first-person point of view instead—to "develop a technique of completely impersonal story-telling in the first-person."

**Plain and Clear Prose Style and Common Themes**  
From his first story, MacLean wrote in plain, clear prose and combined excitement and humor. This technique became the standard for his best novels. In these works he often pitted his protagonists against an adverse environment and their own internal terrors. This he did to illustrate a common theme: the power of raw human courage. MacLean's heroes struggle to overcome incredible dilemmas through a combination of intelligence and physical force.

Following his commercial success and the popularity of his narrative style, MacLean became an influential figure in the thriller genre, influencing later authors, including Dick Francis and Desmond Bagley. After his death in 1987, sales of MacLean's books declined. However, less so in Europe than in the United States.

## Works in Critical Context

Generally speaking, critics disliked MacLean's work, but the public loved it, and his books sold by the millions. Sometimes he is faulted for his melodramatic style and one-dimensional characters. However, MacLean is also praised for his swift narratives and labyrinthine plots. This mixed regard can be seen for a work such as *Ice Station Zebra*.

***Ice Station Zebra*** The novel is set on a U.S. Navy nuclear submarine that takes a British government representative to the Arctic to investigate the mysterious disappearance of members of a scientific expedition. Based on MacLean's usual meticulous research, the book gives a detailed and convincing picture of life aboard a submarine. Again written in the first person, the book combines excitement, humor, and suspense.

Even the *Times Literary Supplement*, which usually belittled MacLean's work, praised *Ice Station Zebra*, although the reviewer, Stephen Kroll, commented that the hero "sounds at times too much like an American private detective." For many of MacLean's readers, however, this characteristic is one of the attractions of the novel. The hero's wry asides enliven the book and add humor to what would otherwise be a grim tale of adversity and mass murder.

## Responses to Literature

1. A common MacLean theme concerns the power of human courage. In an extended definition, explore courage: What is the origin of the word? What do

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who, like MacLean, explored themes of racism and courage amid a backdrop of war:

***A Farewell to Arms*** (1929), a novel by Ernest Hemingway.  
This story of Italian ambulance driver Frederick Henry in love and in war is often considered the definitive war novel.

***All Quiet on the Western Front*** (1929), a novel by Erich Maria Remarque. This tale of a German student and his friends, who sign up to fight in World War I and discover not glory but alienation and death, is considered one of the most powerful antiwar novels ever written.

***Things Fall Apart*** (1959), a novel by Chinua Achebe. This book tells the story of colonialism and its invasive and destructive impact on Nigerian tribal culture.

***Winds of War*** (1971), a modern epic by Herman Wouk. In this immense work, readers get an epic, adventure, and love story at once.

you associate with the word? Make a list. What is your personal definition of courage? As a group, compare and contrast your definitions.

2. Compare your definition of courage with the attitudes and behaviors of one of MacLean's main characters. Does the character qualify as courageous according to your definition? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. MacLean was praised for his use of cinematic techniques in his fiction writing. Consider one or two MacLean novels and identify passages where the writing is movie-like. For instance, one technique employed by the author is crosscutting—two scenes are alternated back and forth to indicate they are happening at the same time. Find examples of this and other cinematic elements.
4. Because of his skillful inclusion of cinematic technique in his fiction, several of MacLean's novels were adapted as movies. These movies were as successful and as popular as the works upon which they were based. Choose one of MacLean's adapted novels and compare it to its movie counterpart. How similar are the two? In what ways are they different?

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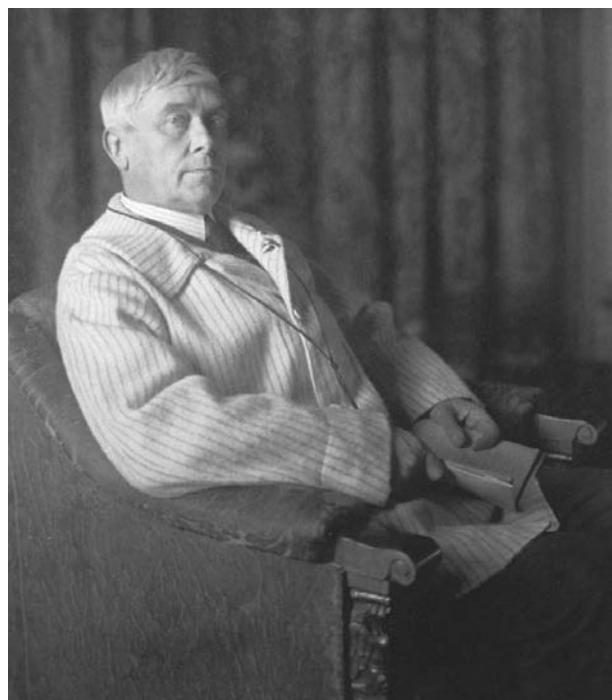
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Maurice Maeterlinck Maeterlinck, Maurice, photograph. The Library of Congress.

## ■ Maurice Maeterlinck

BORN: 1862, Ghent, Belgium

DIED: 1949, Nice, France

NATIONALITY: Belgian

GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Intruder* (1891)

*Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892)

*Interior* (1895)

*The Blue Bird* (1908)

### Overview

Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian of Flemish descent who wrote in French and spent most of his life in France, had a powerful effect on the theatrical world of the late nineteenth century and was the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911. The writer is probably best remembered for his abstract and minimalist experiments, which influenced both his contemporaries and later playwrights who developed the movement called the Theater of the Absurd. In a prolific career that extended into the ninth decade of his life, he published twenty-eight plays, two collections of poetry, two short stories, many volumes of popularizing essays on philosophical, occult, and scientific subjects, and an autobiography.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**From Lawyer to Writer** Maurice Maeterlinck was born in Ghent, Belgium, on August 29, 1862. His family was bilingual and divided its time between a town house in Ghent and a country estate at Oostacker, where Maeterlinck's father raised bees and devoted himself to gardening. Maeterlinck was educated at a convent school, the private Institute Central in Ghent, and the Jesuit Collège Sainte-Barbe, where he met and became friends with the future poet Charles Van Lerberghe. From 1881 to 1885 Maeterlinck studied law at the University of Ghent. At the successful completion of his law studies, the young man persuaded his father to send him to Paris for several months, ostensibly to study French law. Instead of studying, however, Maeterlinck spent his time there in literary circles, where he made important contacts that would later help in his theatrical career.

Returning to Ghent, Maeterlinck practiced law until 1889, "failing brilliantly," in the words of his first biographer, Gerard Harry. During these years, Maeterlinck saw the first publication of his literary work: In 1886 he had his first short story published, and in 1887 twelve of his poems appeared in *Le Parnasse de la jeune Belgique*. In 1889 Maeterlinck published his translation of Jan van Ruysbroeck's fourteenth-century mystical treatise, *Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*, as well as a volume of poetry and a play titled *La Princesse Maleine*.

Except for the play, Maeterlinck's early works were unnoticed by the critics. Maeterlinck, seeking to establish a literary reputation, sent a copy of *Princess Maleine* to the influential symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé, much impressed, gave the play to Octave Mirbeau, who published a highly enthusiastic review of the play in *Le Figaro*, thereby launching Maeterlinck's career as a playwright and man of letters. During the next five years Maeterlinck wrote the plays for which he is best known in literary and theatrical history.

**Success as a Playwright** Maeterlinck's first produced play was *The Intruder*, which opened in Paris on May 21, 1891. His next play opened in the same year on December 7, and his fourth and perhaps best-known play, *Pelléas and Mélisande* opened in 1893. Maeterlinck's next three plays were published together in 1894 as "three little dramas for marionettes." This marked the end of the first phase of Maeterlinck's theatrical production.

At the beginning of 1895, he met Georgette Leblanc, who became his companion and collaborator and for whom he wrote a series of plays incorporating, but by no means entirely affirming, a feminist perspective. In 1896 Maeterlinck moved from his native Belgium to France, and in 1897 he and Leblanc set up house in Paris. During the next eight years, he collaborated with the actress, writing plays specifically for her to perform.

In 1911 Maeterlinck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Other official honors followed; for example, the Belgian government sponsored an official "Festival Maeterlinck" and presented the writer with the insignia of Grand Officier de l'Ordre de Léopold.

**Later Life** During World War I, Maeterlinck attempted to join the French Foreign Legion but was denied due to his age. Thus, instead of serving in the military, he wrote several propagandistic pieces, including *The Burgomaster of Stilmonde*. In 1919 Maeterlinck married Renée Dahon, a young woman whom he had met at a rehearsal of the French production of *The Blue Bird* in 1911. In 1920, during a lecture tour in the United States, Maeterlinck accepted a commission by producer Samuel Goldwyn to write movie scenarios for silent films. Apparently three scenarios were completed, although none was filmed.

Always a solitary figure, Maeterlinck withdrew in his later years to a series of country estates, settling at last into Orlamonde, a palatial residence on the French Riviera that he decorated in art nouveau style and where he played the roles of the country gentleman and reclusive man of letters. Although he continued to write plays after World War I, Maeterlinck was best known in the last four decades of his life for his essays and his courtly lifestyle.

In 1940 Maeterlinck and his wife settled in the United States and remained there until the end of World War II. In 1945 the couple returned to their estate in the south of France. Although Maeterlinck continued to write plays after World War II, he had little to do with

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Maeterlinck's famous contemporaries include:

- Anton Chekhov** (1860–1904): Chekhov was a Russian playwright and short-story writer whose innovations influenced the development of the modern short story.
- O. Henry** (1862–1910): O. Henry was a prolific American short-story writer whose works were known for their cleverness and surprise endings.
- Claude Debussy** (1862–1918): Debussy was a French composer of impressionist music.
- William Butler Yeats** (1865–1939): Yeats was an Irish poet and dramatist widely considered one of the most important figures in twentieth-century literature.
- Georges Feydeau** (1862–1921): Feydeau was a French playwright known for writing light comedies and farces.
- Arnold Schoenberg** (1874–1951): Schoenberg was an Austrian-born composer of expressionist music.
- Albert I** (1875–1934): Albert was the king of Belgium from 1909 until his death in 1934.

theatrical life, and his later plays were seldom performed. The aged writer died from a heart attack on May 6, 1949.

### Works in Literary Context

**Symbolism** Maurice Maeterlinck is considered the major dramatist of the symbolist movement, representing in the theater the philosophy and aesthetics associated with such earlier writers as Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé. The influence of the French symbolists is apparent in Maeterlinck's first plays, which signified a rejection of the predominantly naturalistic drama in European theater of that time. Rather than following in the "slice of life" tradition, which primarily dramatized social themes, Maeterlinck created an otherworldly, often nightmarish reality to explore the inner lives of his characters.

Literary historians generally agree that Maeterlinck's most innovative and influential works were the plays that he wrote in the 1890s and early 1900s. These early plays were especially influential outside France, particularly in Russia.

**Realism** In a second phase of his work, Maeterlinck turned from his previous studies of dream-world anxiety and began composing more markedly realistic and psychological plays, such as *Monna Vanna*. His greatest theatrical success, *The Blue Bird*, is a return to symbolist drama but one in which the allegorical characters and events communicate a new mood of hope based on his studies in the more positive forms of occultism. Maeterlinck's concern with supernatural realms is complemented

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Maeterlinck often made use of Gothic settings that evoked a sense of metaphysical horror. Here are some other works that use a similar approach:

"The Raven" (1845), a poem by Edgar Allan Poe. This poem is an eerie and comic psychological study of perversity and fear.

*Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novella by Joseph Conrad. This short novel explores both inner and outer horrors through the journey of a merchant seaman into the interior of Africa.

*Rosemary's Baby* (1967), a novel by Ira Levin. This novel centers around an actor who makes a deal with the devil to gain success and fame.

*The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), a novel by Ann Radcliffe. This novel follows the fortunes of Emily St. Aubin during her stay in a haunted decaying castle. Radcliffe's book has often been cited as the archetypal Gothic romance.

by his naturalist studies, such as *The Life of the Bee*, which lend a scientific dimension to the predominantly spiritual character of his work.

**Tranquil Agnosticism** Maeterlinck's later works show that any specific spiritual convictions he might have had became less definite toward the end of his life. After a career-long devotion to the varieties of mysticism, Maeterlinck implied in his ultimate metaphysical studies a final abandonment of the pursuit for religious certainty and a lapse into tranquil agnosticism.

Maeterlinck was critical of tragedians who centered their works on sensational scenes of violence while "most of us pass our lives far from blood, screams and swords and whereas man's tears have become silent, invisible and almost spiritual." What can one learn, he asks, from beings who have only one obsession and who have no time to live because they must kill a rival or a mistress? Maeterlinck preferred drama that explores the mysteries of man's humble, ordinary life—its beauty, its grandeur, and its gravity, which he himself may not be able to observe on a daily basis. Maeterlinck famously illustrated this notion of everyday mystical experience through the image of an old man seated in an armchair who listens, albeit unwittingly, to all of the "eternal laws" pervading his home. For Maeterlinck, this "immobile old man actually lives a more profound life than the lover who strangles his mistress, or the captain victorious in battle or the husband who avenges his honor."

**Legacy** The legacy of Maeterlinck is double-edged. On the one hand, he was one of the most innovative dram-

atists of fin-de-siècle Europe. His plays point forward to the intimate theater of August Strindberg, Max Reinhardt, and other major twentieth-century playwrights and directors. They played a crucial role in the development of Russian symbolism. The early plays influenced William Butler Yeats, and their emphasis on myth and sacrifice also points toward the dramatic theories and practice of Antonin Artaud. Maeterlinck himself was capable of taking up and transforming a new form in the theater, such as the station drama. But, on the other hand, his writing, especially his essays, sometimes lapses into clichés and apolitical complacency. At his worst he warns of the dangers of New Age philosophy. At his best he reminds one of the necessary relationship between good theater and the unknown.

### Works in Critical Context

Maeterlinck's first drama, *Princess Maleine*, was described by the French critic Octave Mirbeau as being superior in beauty to William Shakespeare. Later critics generally concurred in judging favorably these early symbolist dramas, and on their strength Maeterlinck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1911. Though for the most part highly regarded, Maeterlinck has been accused by some critics of cultivating a sense of mystery for its own sake, resulting in obscure images that fail to resonate with the audience or reader.

**Two Fairy Tales** In the 1890 review that brought *Princess Maleine* and its author to the attention of the literary world, Octave Mirbeau celebrated Maeterlinck's play by comparing it to the work of William Shakespeare. Maeterlinck's fourth play, *Pelléas and Mélisande*, first performed in 1893, became his best known, partly because of Claude Debussy's 1902 musical adaptation.

**Pelléas and Mélisande** To this day, *Pelléas and Mélisande* remains one of the most representative masterpieces of symbolist drama. Like *Princess Maleine*, this ethereal play also turns to fairy tales for its subject, and its evocation of a vaguely northern kingdom ruled by an aging and ineffectual king strongly recalls *Princess Maleine*. J. W. Mackail, writing in 1897, states of the play, "all but faultless in its construction, more than faultless in its beauty, it is difficult to speak with tempered praise, or in words that shall not seem extravagant." Calvin Evans in *Modern Drama* contends that the play "represents one of the few dramatic expressions of the Symbolist movement, a movement which, above all, challenges the primacy of the intellect." Joan Pataky Kosove, in an essay for *The French Review*, writes, "The play leaves us sad but somehow satisfied.... Indeed one is tempted to call its outlook anti-tragic."

### Responses to Literature

1. Why does Maeterlinck use fairy tale settings in many of his plays? What kinds of effects do these settings have on the messages and meanings of his works?

2. Maeterlinck's dramas explored the mysteries of ordinary life and eschewed thrilling scenes of violence. In what ways did this choice make his plays more effective than more sensationalized drama, and in what ways did it diminish their impact?
3. In addition to writing plays, Maeterlinck also wrote numerous essays, some of them on the aesthetic and philosophical principles that informed his writing. Imagine that you are a playwright and write an essay that expounds the principles that would underlie your writing.
4. Maeterlinck was noted for being an influential symbolist, but his works also contain many elements of realism. Write an essay that describes Maeterlinck's mixture of symbolism and realism, commenting on the effectiveness of this approach.

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## Jayanta Mahapatra

BORN: 1928, Cuttack, India

NATIONALITY: Indian

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Rain of Rites* (1976)

- Relationship* (1980)  
*Life Signs* (1983)  
*Temple* (1989)  
*Bare Face* (2000)

#### Overview

Jayanta Mahapatra writes largely about the people and places of Orissa, an eastern Indian state. His sensibility is deeply submerged in the local landscape—a vast panorama of temples, rivers, mountains, marketplaces, cafés, brothels, and forests—and the rites, rituals, ceremonies, and seasons of the place.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Christian Upbringing in a Hindu Land** Jayanta Mahapatra was born on October 22, 1928, in Cuttack, Orissa, the first child of Lemuel Mahapatra, an inspector of primary schools, and Sudnasubala Rout Mahapatra, a housewife of simple habits and no education. Mahapatra was brought up in a lower-middle-class Christian family, according to Christian rules and in strict separation from the surrounding Hindu way of life. The tension slowly began to affect his personality, and he began to have differences with his mother in ways that constrained him from relating with others outside the house. Mahapatra thus developed a permanent aversion to his mother (although he was fond of his father) and grew up as a reclusive, dreamy, and detached child. His family situation and dreamworld made for complex emotions that found their way into his poetry. Mahapatra's father was always a source of consolation, education, and inspiration for him. The two enjoyed a pleasant and gratifying relationship. Lemuel Mahapatra fostered in his son a love for narrative art and stimulated his creative imagination early in life.

During Mahapatra's youth, India was officially a colony of the British Empire. This led to a mix of both traditional Indian and contemporary English cultural influences, most notably the widespread use of the English language. A popular movement supporting the independence of India gained momentum throughout the 1920s and 1930s, largely due to the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi. The country finally achieved its independence from Britain in 1948, while Mahapatra was still a student.

**From Physics to Poetry** In 1949 Mahapatra received a master's degree in physics and began to work as a lecturer at Ravenshaw College. Subsequently, he taught at other colleges in Orissa. He wrote poems while working as a teacher but had a late start as a professional writer—he was in his early forties before he started to publish his works. Successive volumes of his verse brought him recognition not only in India but also in other countries.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mahapatra's famous contemporaries include:

- Edward Albee** (1928–): Albee is an American playwright who writes mainly black comedies in the tradition of the theater of the absurd.
- Noam Chomsky** (1928–): Chomsky is an American linguist and political activist best known for his critiques of the modern media and U.S. foreign policy.
- Philip K. Dick** (1928–1982): Dick was an influential American science fiction writer whose works have been adapted to several popular films.
- Carlos Fuentes** (1928–): Fuentes is a Mexican novelist who has been a significant influence on contemporary Latin American literature.
- Gabriel García Márquez** (1928–): García Márquez is a Colombian fiction writer widely considered one of the most important authors of the twentieth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1982.
- Hosni Mubarak** (1928–): Mubarak is an Egyptian statesman who has been the president of Egypt since 1981.
- Elie Wiesel** (1928–): Wiesel is a Jewish writer and political activist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He is best known for writing about his Holocaust experiences.

In 1975 Mahapatra became the first Indian to receive the coveted Jacob Glatstein Memorial Prize, given by *Poetry* magazine. From 1976 to 1977 Mahapatra was a visiting writer in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa; he traveled to Australia and Japan in 1978 and 1980. He continued to teach physics until he retired in 1986.

### Works in Literary Context

In his poetry Mahapatra transforms the profane into the sacred in order to describe the cultural life of his people. The setting of Orissa, however, is always intersected by the poet's own experience and reactions to his homeland. As Devinder Mohan observes, "His self-exploratory journey leads him to the point of heightened self-awareness, then to self-actualization and of course ultimately towards self-realization, which has forever remained the highest goal of every *sadhaka* (devout practitioner) of all arts." Like T. S. Eliot, Mahapatra creates order out of disorder and cohesion out of chaos by way of performing his duty as a poet.

**An Indian Sensibility in the English Language**  
Mahapatra writes in English, yet his poetry is distinctively Indian. His struggle in his early poetry was compounded by his efforts to synchronize his Indian experience with

the English language. For this reason, in his early verse, "earth, life, and language become exterior blinking spaces, isolated yet longing for a sense of simultaneity, a sense of possibility of segmental intermingling." Mahapatra carried out this crusade of experimentation and exploration both in theme and language.

Many of Mahapatra's poems feature his home, Orissa, a rural region of India. His themes are the traditional, apparently timeless concerns of his country—spirituality, hunger, death, and rebirth. His questioning, somber poetry evokes the Indian belief in cultural stasis and inevitability. He explains that he was raised to believe that "things happen as they do because...of things that have happened before, and that nothing can change the sequence of things." Thus, Mahapatra often writes of immediately perceived physical and social realities without probing their causes.

A further reason for the dominance of the rural Indian sensibility in Mahapatra's poetry may lie in his lack of acquaintance with a world of poetic tradition. Mahapatra is a physics professor who admits, "I haven't read much poetry in my life," and he did not start writing until he was almost forty years old. He produced his first volumes of poetry after briefly experimenting with writing short fiction and participating in writers' workshops.

**Discursive Style** Mahapatra is known for his distinctively discursive poetic style. The absence of sympathy with suffering humanity in much Indo-Anglian poetry troubles him. For that reason, he emphasizes key contemporary social issues in his verse, thereby generating critical debate among readers and scholars. His subjects include poverty, hunger, prostitution, death, suicide, crime, war, violence, religious bigotry, and the exploitation of women and children. These problems afflict the entire Indian nation, and he feels them even more acutely in his native state of Orissa. Mahapatra has formulated a poetic idiom of his own; he does not concern himself with coherence in metrical arrangements and grammar in syntactical constructions in capturing the human soul.

Mahapatra uses symbols and images from his immediate surroundings (often found in nature) for an easy evocation of the native sensibility. His allusions to a variety of subjects make his poetry richer in meaning and resonant with deep erudition. As Ujjal Dutta notes, "Mahapatra is fond of juxtaposition of images in a sequence of disorder.... For him, the external reality is not something out there, but something that yields to the pressure of the consciousness and is sieved through it."

### Works in Critical Context

Perhaps because Mahapatra started publishing poetry only in his early forties, he was not initially taken as seriously by reviewers and researchers as other Indo-Anglian poets. It therefore took some time for him to make his presence felt on the Indian literary scene. Like the works of his favorite poet, John Keats, Mahapatra's

early poems met with a hostile reception from many critics and commentators. Slowly, however, Mahapatra gained ground in Indian criticism and eventually came to be recognized as one of the significant poets of his generation.

Mahapatra's first volume published in the United States, *A Rain of Rites* (1976), was highly acclaimed and resulted in his attendance at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program. His later verse heightened his reputation as an accomplished and prolific poet. Mahapatra has now become a favorite with scholars and readers in India and abroad. Reviewers have responded warmly and favorably to his poetry. He has by now acquired the status of a leading Indian-English poet and is currently one of the most active Indian cultural ambassadors to the rest of the world. His rich perception of life and experimentation with the English language have made him a major and mature presence in contemporary Indian poetry in English.

***A Rain of Rites*** *A Rain of Rites* was published a few days before Mahapatra's departure to the United States in 1976. In response to this work, Dick Allen observed that "Mahapatra, in contrast to most American poets, is most at home with poems which touch the beyond. The poetry of *A Rain of Rites* is that of a man taking up a stance against or within mysteries, sensitive to the moods of days and years." The collection is largely devoted to women and their position in Indian society. The subject is mainly the maltreatment of women in India and their passive submission to fate for reasons such as hunger and poverty. His preoccupation with women in these poems reflects his experiences with his mother in the past and his relationship with his wife in the present. Reviewing this collection, Vernon Young wrote, "The manner of apprehension in [Mahapatra's] wonderful, sensate poems inevitably brings to the tongue the word 'sophistication.' ... Evident in every cadence is the long over-ripening of a sardonic wisdom, the tired consciousness of too many beginnings."

## Responses to Literature

1. Mahapatra demonstrates a strong concern for the dominance of senseless violence in modern society. Can literature adequately express the nature of this violence? How, if at all, does poetry such as his contribute to ending this violence?
2. Mahapatra initially had little knowledge of world literature, but after receiving critical attention, he traveled widely. Can you detect a transformation in his poetry to reflect a wider global viewpoint? What aspects of his career as a physics instructor influence his poetry?
3. Mahapatra often features his hometown of Orissa in his poems, which he uses to explore traditional and timeless concerns of India such as spirituality, hunger, death, and rebirth. List some of the traditional

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In his poetry, Mahapatra explores contemporary social issues and emphasizes present-day problems, such as poverty, violence, war, and exploitation. Here are some other works that take a similar approach:

- "I Explain a Few Things" (1937), a poem by Pablo Neruda. This poem starkly depicts the devastating result of the Spanish civil war.
- Age of Iron* (1990), a novel by J. M. Coetzee. This novel depicts the social and political consequences of the apartheid regime in South Africa.
- Blood Diamond* (2006), a film directed by Edward Zwick. This film explores the connection between diamond merchants and the financing of warlords that fuels ongoing conflicts in Africa.

and timeless concerns of your culture, and write a poem making use of your home town to explore these concerns.

4. Choose several of Mahapatra's poems that deal with a single contemporary social problem and write an essay discussing how his poetry brings to light important aspects of this problem.

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## ■ Naguib Mahfouz

BORN: 1911, Cairo, Egypt

DIED: 2006, Cairo, Egypt

NATIONALITY: Egyptian

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Palace Walk* (1956)

*Palace of Desire* (1957)

*Sugar Street* (1957)

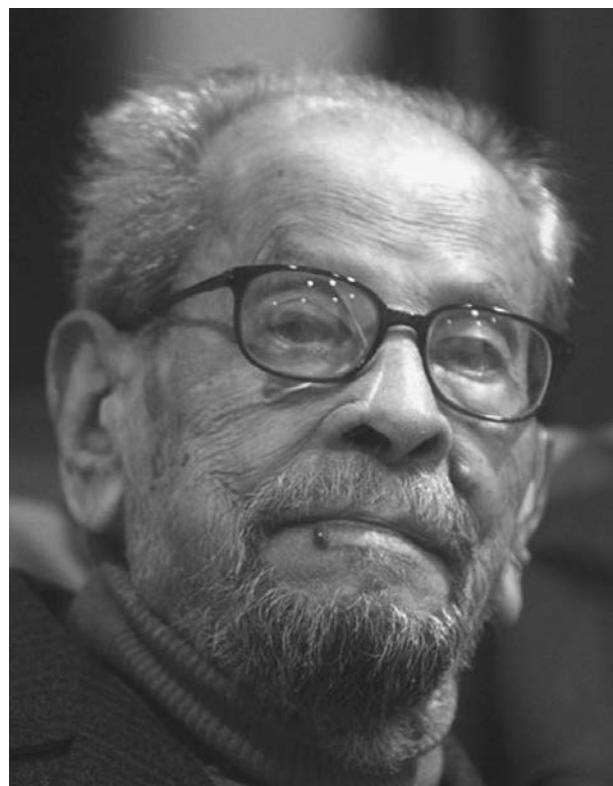
*Miramar* (1967)

### Overview

Considered modern Egypt's foremost literary figure, Naguib Mahfouz is credited with popularizing the novel and short story as viable genres in Arab literature. He is best known for novels in which he creates psychological portraits of characters whose personal struggles mirror the social, political, religious, and cultural concerns confronting Mahfouz's Egyptian homeland. Mahfouz was the first Arabic-language author awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, winning in 1998.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Began Writing Career at University** Born Najib Abdel Aziz al-Sabilgi Mahfouz on December 10, 1911, in Cairo, Egypt, he was the son of Abdel Aziz Ibrahim Mahfouz, a merchant, and his wife, Fatma Mostapha. Because his siblings were many years older, he grew up essentially an only child. In 1934, Mahfouz received a degree in philosophy from the University of Cairo and did postgraduate study in philosophy for the next two years. At the time, Egypt was a protectorate of the United Kingdom but was also a nominally sovereign country ruled by a king although it also had a growing nationalist movement. While the United Kingdom controlled foreign affairs, defense, security of communications, and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, the situation changed in 1936. That year, King Faruk ascended to the throne and the



Naguib Mahfouz AP Images

Anglo-Egyptian Treaty limited British control to only armed forces in specified areas, primarily along the vital Suez Canal.

Encouraged by Salama Musa, an Egyptian socialist and editor of an intellectual journal, Mahfouz began writing short stories while he was a university student. Many of these stories were collected in *Whisper of Madness* (1939). Mahfouz's first published book was *Ancient Egypt* (1932), a translation of a history text written in English by James Baikie. Mahfouz's first three novels—*Abath al-aqdar* (1939), *Radubis* (1943), and *Kiftah Tiba* (1944)—are historical narratives set in ancient Egypt that contain allusions to modern society.

**The Cairo Trilogy** In response to the political and social conditions in Egypt during World War II, Mahfouz turned his attention from ancient history to the contemporary situation of Egypt. During World War II, a massive conflict launched in Europe because of the aggressive territorial ambitions of Nazi Germany, Egypt served as a base of operations for the Allies (Great Britain, France, and, later, the United States). While the war was being fought, the Egyptian nationalist movement continued to grow. After World War II ended, the government in Cairo abrogated the 1936 treaty in 1951. Because of royal extravagance, government corruption, and delays in social and political reforms, King Faruk was removed from power in a coup. He was first replaced by his seven-month-old son,

but in 1953, a republic was proclaimed, with General Muhammad Naguib serving as Egypt's first president. In 1954, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of the revolution, forced Naguib out of power and took control of Egypt himself. Egypt sought international support for key internal projects, and also unified with the Syria in the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958–1961).

In what is known as the Cairo Trilogy, Mahfouz created a series of portraits of several Cairo families. *Palace Walk* (1956), *Palace of Desire: Cairo Trilogy II* (1957), and *Sugar Street: The Cairo Trilogy III* (1957) depict families and communities from the middle and lower classes of Egyptian society, some struggling to climb the social ladder, others trying to survive, while the country witnesses a period of turmoil both domestically and internationally. The novels cover such topics as the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 (in which nationalist Egyptians attempted to gain independence from Great Britain), the effects of modernization on cultural and religious values, and changing social attitudes toward women, education, and science.

**Disillusionment** Although Mahfouz had supported the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, which successfully overthrew the monarchy and eventually established Egypt as a republic, he became disillusioned with the resulting social, educational, and land reforms. After seven years of silence, Mahfouz wrote the pessimistic and allegorical novel *Children of Gebelawi* in 1959. In thinly veiled allusions to the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the narrative relates humanity's quest for religion, beginning with Adam and Eve and ending with the last prophet—represented as the modern man of science—who is inadvertently responsible for the death of Gebelawi (God). Although it was published in Lebanon in 1967, the novel has not yet been published in Egypt. A 1969 serialization of the novel inflamed Islamic fundamentalists and led to the banning of the manuscript's publication in book form. A new English translation of the book appeared in 1995 under the title *Children of the Alley*.

**Social Commentary Fiction** Drawing on his education in philosophy and his familiarity with the cities of his country, Mahfouz was committed to writing fiction that revealed the hopes and concerns of the Egyptian people. The portraits he drew were not always flattering. One such novel is *Miramar* (1967), one of Mahfouz's most acclaimed later works, which examines the behavior of several male residents in an Alexandrian boardinghouse when a beautiful and naive young rural woman is hired as a maid. The novel expands from this situation to become a general critique of Egyptian society.

*Al-Hubb tahta al-matar* (1973) and *Al-Karnak* (1974) contrast the repressive actions of authorities during the postrevolutionary regime of Nasser with the idealism of young people hoping for political and social reform. Reflecting the content of much of Mahfouz's later work, these novels also examine the disillusionment

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mahfouz's famous contemporaries include:

**Menachem Begin** (1913–1992): Begin, the sixth prime minister of Israel and cowinner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for Peace with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, began the 1982 Lebanon War as a retaliatory gesture against the Abu Nidal terrorist organization.

**Jimmy Carter** (1924–): After a term marred by inflation, fuel shortages, and U.S. hostages held in Iran, Carter, the thirty-ninth president of the United States, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for the humanitarian work he did in the years after his presidency.

**Tawfiq el-Hakim** (1898–1987): This Egyptian dramatist and novelist established serious drama as an Egyptian art form. His plays include *The People of the Cave* (1993).

**Anwar el-Sadat** (1918–1981): Sadat, the third president of Egypt and cowinner of the 1978 Nobel Prize for Peace with Israeli prime minister Begin, was assassinated by radicals opposed to his position on Israel.

**Yusuf Idris** (1927–1991): Many of the realistic short stories by this Egyptian writer are in the vernacular. His short-story collections include *Akrhas Layali* (1954).

**Salman Rushdie** (1947–): Rushdie is an Indian writer and novelist who uses magical realism in his novels. *The Satanic Verses* (1988) led to protests and death threats over his portrayal of the prophet Muhammad.

and malaise that affected Egypt following the country's military defeat in the 1967 Six Day War against Israel. (The Six Day War pitted Israel against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. During the six-day conflict, Israel conquered the Sinai Peninsula, West Bank, and Golan Heights, which became the so-called Occupied Territories.)

**Turned to Fables** Many of Mahfouz's later works were extended fables. Taking its inspiration and form directly from *A Thousand and One Nights, Arabian Nights and Days* (1981) is more a loosely connected set of tales than a novel. A later novel, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma*, (1983) is loosely based on a classic of Western literature, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Mahfouz's influence on Egyptian literature expanded to several other areas. He contributed columns on a wide range of topics to *Al-Ahram*, a leading Egyptian newspaper. As a dramatist and scriptwriter, Mahfouz endeavored to elevate the intellectual content of theater and film in Egypt. He also published several collections of short stories. *God's World: An Anthology of Short Stories* (1973) offers English translations of stories from several phases of Mahfouz's career.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Social realism is a style of literature that gives an uncensored view of society. Here are some other works of social realism:

*The Doll* (1890), a novel by Boleslaw Prus. This novel examines the lives of two men living in Warsaw, Poland, under Russian rule.

*Middlemarch* (1871–1872), a novel by George Eliot. Subtitled "A Story of Provincial Life," this novel examines the life and moral code of a small English town.

*Les Misérables* (1862), a novel by Victor Hugo. This novel, later turned into a Broadway musical, follows a group of poor French citizens and criminals during and after the Napoleonic period.

*Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), a novel by Charles Dickens. This novel follows an orphan through the gritty underworld of Victorian London.

*The Red and the Black* (1830), a novel by Stendhal. This coming-of-age novel tells of a young man's struggle to make a future for himself in France.

**Nobel Laureate** In 1988, Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in recognition of his dedication to developing a tradition of modern fiction in Arabic. Along with worldwide acclaim, the award also brought Mahfouz a death sentence. The same year Salman Rushdie was denounced for his *Satanic Verses* (1988), an influential Egyptian Muslim cleric issued a death sentence against Mahfouz for his notorious novel *Children of Gebelawi*. On October 13, 1994, the anniversary of the announcement of his Nobel Prize, Mahfouz was stabbed in the neck by a religious fanatic. Although Mahfouz recovered, the attack left him unable to write with a pen, forcing him to dictate his later works, which included his 1997 autobiography *Echoes of an Autobiography*.

In the years preceding his death, several of his fictional works appeared in English translation, including his first three novels. His last "writing" consisted of short pieces that he dictated for publication, including weekly newspaper columns. Up until his death, Mahfouz published accounts of his own dreams in a Cairo periodical. These pieces appeared in book form under the title *The Dreams* in 2005. Mahfouz died on August 30, 2006, at the age of ninety-four.

### Works in Literary Context

**Influences** Mahfouz's prose works—which have been compared in spirit, tone, and ambience with the raw social realism of nineteenth-century novelists Honoré de Balzac and Charles Dickens—reflect Egypt's volatile political history and illustrate the distressing conditions

under which the Arab poor live. Mahfouz himself cited Russian novelists Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as inspirations.

**Oppressed Characters** From the very beginning, Mahfouz's interest in characters who strive to endure societal oppression has been evident. Early stories in *Hams al junun*, for instance, explore themes of conformity and deviance from the norm. In works such as *Midaq Alley* (1947) and *The Beginning and the End* (1951), Mahfouz blends formal language with colloquialisms. At the same time, he depicts the struggle and turmoil of individuals in repressive environments.

**Literary Techniques** In his later works, Mahfouz uses literary devices such as allegory, symbolism, and experimental narrative techniques to explore social and cultural disillusionment, spiritual crisis, alienation, political issues, and corruption in contemporary Egypt. *The Children of Gebelawi*, for instance, is an allegory in which Egypt's contemporary social concerns are linked with those of the past. Modeling his characters on religious figures including Jesus, Adam, Satan, Moses, and Muhammad, Mahfouz explores such broad themes as the nature of evil and the meaning of life. Furthermore, he proclaims science and technology to be humanity's modern prophets.

In the 1960s, Mafouz abandoned the traditional realism that characterized his previous works. He produced shorter novels that employed many of the experimental techniques—including stream of consciousness and scriptlike dialogue—of modern Western literature. For example, *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961) demonstrates Mahfouz's experiments with unconventional techniques as he uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative to create a psychological portrait of a wrongly imprisoned man who upon his release seeks revenge. This is one of several works in which Mahfouz depicts an outlaw who is rebelling against repressive values, often embodied by unscrupulous officials.

### Works in Critical Context

Mahfouz pioneered the development of the modern Arabic novel and became its first genuine master. Edward Said wrote, "Naguib Mahfouz's achievement as the greatest living Arab novelist and first Arab winner of the Nobel Prize has in small but significant measure now retrospectively vindicated his unmatched regional reputation, and belatedly given him recognition in the West."

**Khan al-khalili** Most critics agree that Mahfouz's talent matured with *Khan al-khalili* (1945), his first novel set in contemporary Cairo. M. M. Badawi commented, "*Khan al-khalili* began a series of eight novels in which [Mahfouz] emerged as the master *par excellence* of the Egyptian realistic novel, the chronicler of twentieth-century Egypt, and its most vocal social and political conscience.... [Mahfouz's Cairo] is a recognizable

physical presence; its powerful impact upon the lives of characters is as memorable as that of Dickens's London, Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg or Zola's Paris."

**The Cairo Trilogy;** Roger Allen called the Cairo Trilogy "a monumental work," and Sasson Somekh added that the author's masterpiece is also "symbolic... because through the development of its characters you can see the development of modern Egypt.... No future student of Egyptian politics, society or folklore will be able to overlook the material embodied in Mahfouz's Trilogy."

## Responses to Literature

- When you read, do you read to escape or to learn about the world? Do you think realistic fiction has a place for today's readers? Why or why not? Write a paper that outlines your opinions.
- Hip-hop artists often defend the language and topics of their lyrics by saying that they are just reflecting their society. Why do their lyrics not change once they become successful and move to wealthy neighborhoods? Are they genuinely concerned about their roots, or are they capitalizing on what made them successful? Create a presentation, using musical examples, to illustrate your points.
- Some well-known artists, such as Bono, U2's lead singer, actively work for social justice. Do artists—singers, writers, filmmakers, and others—have a responsibility to promote solutions to the social issues they bring up? Write a paper in which you explain your arguments.
- Books are banned in the United States today, not just in Arab countries. Are there ever cases where banning books is justified, such as books about terrorism or ones that promote violence against a particular group? Research book banning in the United States. Write an essay arguing for or against the practice of banning books. Use specific examples in your argument.

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## Stéphane Mallarmé

BORN: 1842, Paris, France

DIED: 1898, Valvins, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Drama, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Hérodiade* (1864)

*Afternoon of a Faun* (1876)

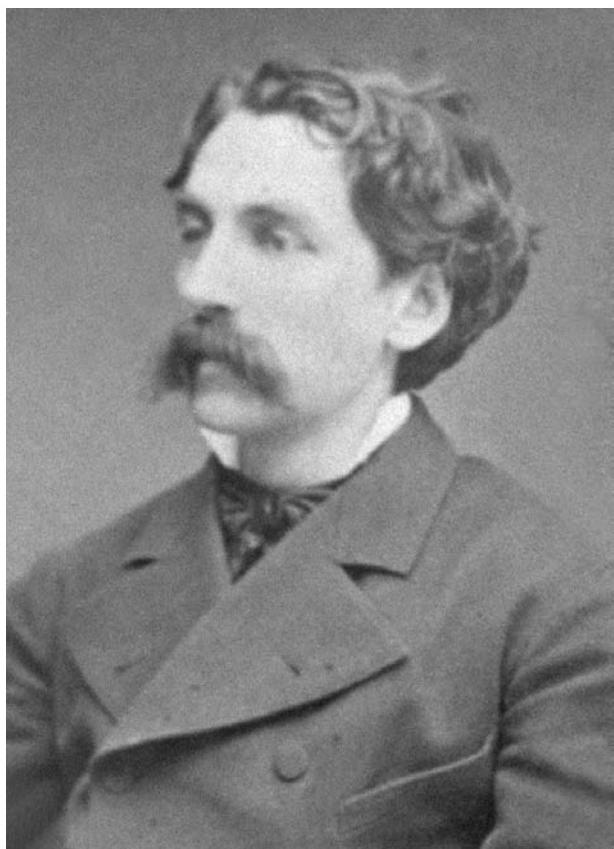
*A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance* (1914)

### Overview

Stéphane Mallarmé is one of France's four major poets of the second half of the nineteenth century, along with Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud. Although he was recognized as a prominent artist during his lifetime, much of his poetry was acknowledged to be difficult to understand because of its fractured syntax, ambiguous expressions, and obscure imagery. Critics during his lifetime and afterward have continued to disagree as to the precise interpretations of many of his later works.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Bourgeois Upbringing** Stéphane Mallarmé—as he is known, although his birth certificate records his first name in its more usual French form of "Etienne"—was born into a middle-class family on March 18, 1842, in Paris. His mother died when he was seven years old, after which his maternal grandmother played an increasingly significant role in his upbringing. His grandmother sent Mallarmé to various boarding schools, generally attended by the upper-class, where he often felt self-conscious and ill-at-ease because of his bourgeois background. When Mallarmé was fifteen, his youngest sister and closest companion, Maria, died. Her death strongly affected



Stéphane Mallarmé *Mallarme, Stephane, photograph. The Library of Congress.*

Mallarmé's development as a poet; he abandoned his youthful interest in Romantic lyricism and turned to Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857, Flowers of Evil) for inspiration. Mallarmé's earliest work, in which he chose to describe imaginative visions rather than depict reality, dates from this period. While his family disapproved of his interest in Baudelaire and confiscated his copy of the book, Baudelaire remained Mallarmé's first strong literary influence.

**First Publication, Language Studies, and Return to France** In 1860, Mallarmé received his baccalaureate degree from the university in Sens; after graduation he became an apprentice at his grandfather's registry office. He also became friends with professor Emmanuel des Essarts, with whom he discussed literature and art. Encouraged by des Essarts, Mallarmé published his first sonnet in 1862 in the short-lived literary journal *Le papillon*. Shortly after the sonnet's publication, Mallarmé met his future wife, Maria Gerhard, a schoolteacher who accompanied him to London in 1863. Mallarmé aspired to become a foreign-language teacher and to learn English in order to translate Edgar Allan Poe. He succeeded, and his translation, *Les poèmes d'Edgar Poe*, appeared in 1888. When he returned to France at the age

of twenty-two, Mallarmé married Gerhard and took a teaching position in Tournon, a small village on the Rhone River.

**Poetic Struggles** Although Mallarmé had already begun to develop his poetic and linguistic theories, his work and meditations were constantly interrupted by what he considered the tedious duties of a schoolteacher. His pupils openly mocked him, and when Mallarmé's poem "L'azur" (The Sky) was published, along with ten other pieces in *Le parnasse contemporain* in 1866, the students scrawled the poem's final line over the blackboard: "Je suis hanté. L'azur! l'azur! l'azur!" (I am haunted. The sky! The sky! The sky!) Their ridicule, however, did not inhibit Mallarmé's poetic studies, and although his writing habits were slow and meticulous, his work began to receive attention in literary circles. Poe replaced Baudelaire as Mallarmé's dominant literary influence, and he began to write lengthy, dreamlike poems that reflected the poetic theories of his new mentor.

**Inventing Language from Poetics** After his poems were published in *Le parnasse contemporain*, Mallarmé wrote a letter to his friend Henri Cazalis in which he explained his developing poetic aesthetic and his work on a prose poem titled *Hérodiade*: "[I] am inventing a language that must necessarily spring from a very new poetics, which I could define in these few words: *to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces*. The poetic line should be composed not of words but of intentions, and all words should efface themselves before sensations. I mean—for the first time in my life—to succeed. I would never pick up a pen again if I failed." *Hérodiade* is a reworking of the biblical story about Hérodiade, or Salome, as she is also known, who causes John the Baptist's murder by decapitation. In Mallarmé's interpretation, Hérodiade is a melancholic and chaste princess who eschews her own sexuality in order to attain moral perfection. This work, which remained unfinished, caused Mallarmé much anguish throughout his life as he struggled to properly convey his poetic vision.

**An Exploration of Sensuality** As Mallarmé was struggling to complete *Hérodiade*, he began to compose *Afternoon of a Faun*, which he intended to be a companion piece to the first work. In a letter to Henri Cazalis dated 1865, Mallarmé explained his motivations: "I have been at work for ten days. I have left Hérodiade for the cruel winter: That solitary work had sterilized me, and in the interval I am rhyming an heroic interlude with a *Faun* as its hero." While *Hérodiade* is a mystical interpretation of sexual repression, *Afternoon of a Faun* addresses how sensuality, ardor, and physical sensation attain significance through meditative introspection. Therefore, while *Hérodiade* suggests chastity can lead to spiritual perfection, *Afternoon of a Faun* explores the nature of sensual pleasure only to reveal the deceptive nature of illusion and reality.

**The Belle Époque** The period during which Mallarmé grew up and attained success was known in France as the Belle Époque, or Beautiful Era. This was a time notable throughout Europe for its political stability and economic prosperity. The Franco-Prussian War, the culmination of many years of hostilities between Germany and France, came to an end in 1871; the devastation of World War I would not arrive until more than forty years later. Because of this relative peace and prosperity, the Belle Époque led to a flowering of the arts, with performance arts, such as plays and music, enjoying a boost as audiences sought light entertainment. Mallarmé's work was perfectly suited for the French audiences of this time period.

**The Tuesday Poets** In 1875 Mallarmé moved to Paris, where he obtained a teaching position at Collège Rollin and came in contact with such notable Parisian poets as Paul Verlaine and Theodore de Banville. Gustave Kahn, in particular, admired Mallarmé's poetry and began to call on him in the evening. Others soon joined him, and Tuesdays became the day that Mallarmé received visitors. As the number of guests grew, the legendary Tuesday evening meetings or *les mardis* (Tuesdays) grew famous, and the faithful became known as *les mardistes*. In 1884, Mallarmé finally achieved widespread recognition when two books by *mardistes* were published: *Les poètes maudits* by Verlaine, and *A rebours* by Joris Karl Huysmans, which hailed Mallarmé's prose poems. By 1891, such young poets as Paul Valéry and André Gide had joined the group. At these meetings, Mallarmé lectured on how to use words as symbols and was revered by his audience as an oracle. Because of the tremendous influence he had over the writers of his time, Mallarmé became known in certain literary circles as the "Master of Symbolism."

**Persistence Against All Odds** Uncertain and despondent though he may have felt late in life, Mallarmé nevertheless recovered sufficiently from his pessimism on occasions to write elegies to Baudelaire in 1895, to Verlaine in 1897 and to Vasco da Gama in 1898. This last poem, "Au seul souci de voyager" (To life's sole goal of sailing onwards) was written to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of da Gama's voyage to India, but Mallarmé also saw, in the great explorer's persistence in sailing into the unknown against all odds, an image of his own unwavering pursuit of the ideal world, despite disappointments and setbacks. Mallarmé died in Valvins later that year.

### Works in Literary Context

Mallarmé's vision was of the transcendent word—of language that belongs neither to the world of things nor to the human world of speech but rather to primordial emptiness, in which the splendor of beauty exists as a sheer presence, a pure quality not based on any reality but the written word. Although Mallarmé has sometimes been hailed as the originator of the symbolist school, his

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mallarmé's famous contemporaries include:

**Rainer Maria Rilke** (1875–1926): A transitional figure between traditional and modernist poetry, Rilke—who wrote in both German and French—is considered one of Germany's greatest poets.

**William Butler Yeats** (1865–1939): Irish poet and playwright, Yeats had won the Nobel Prize in Literature even before his greatest works were published.

**Alexander Graham Bell** (1847–1922): Inspired by his work with speech therapy, Bell experimented with mechanical speech devices. These experiments eventually led to his most famous invention, the telephone, a device he would later repudiate as too much of a distraction.

**Wyatt Earp** (1848–1929): One of the prototypical figures of the American Old West, lawman and entrepreneur Earp is best remembered today for his role in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, along with Doc Holliday and Earp's brothers Virgil and Morgan.

**Sanford B. Dole** (1844–1926): A member of the wealthy family that owned the well-known pineapple-canning company, Dole was instrumental in forcing the late-nineteenth-century transition of Hawaii from a monarchy to an American territory.

**Alfred Dreyfus** (1859–1935): A French artillery officer who was charged with treason in 1894 in what was revealed to be an anti-Semitic conspiracy. His subsequent exoneration was one of the biggest political scandals of its day.

poetic aesthetic was greatly influenced by the works of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud, other French poets also associated with the developing trend toward symbolic representation of human emotion.

**Symbolism** Stéphane Mallarmé was one of the foremost contributors to French symbolism, a nineteenth-century poetic movement whose members believed that the function of poetry was to evoke moods and impressions rather than to describe concrete realities. Mallarmé differed from his predecessors, however; while he was dissatisfied with conventional interpretations of existence, he attempted to delineate other possibilities in a way that appealed not only to the heart but also to the intellect. Charles Chadwick explained: "[Mallarmé] could not simply take refuge in some exotic memory or vision of an ideal world. If there was an alternative to reality then it must, in Mallarmé's view, be capable of rational definition." Attempting to transcend the limits of language and therefore locate what he believed was the purity and

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Mallarmé is often cited as one of the first symbolist poets. His work was an inspiration to a generation of artists. Some of the best-known symbolist poetry includes:

*A Season in Hell* (1873), an extended poem by Arthur Rimbaud. The prototypical *enfant terrible*, Rimbaud had written his best work and quit poetry before his twentieth birthday; *A Season in Hell's* hallucinogenic imagery would continue to influence many artistic movements beyond symbolism.

*Sagesse* (1880, Wisdom), a poetry collection by Paul Verlaine. A collection of poems dealing with maturation, Verlaine's poetry was, like his partner Rimbaud's, influential on nonsymbolist poets and artists in the twentieth century.

*Au Le jardin de l'infante* (1893, Garden of the Princess), a poetry collection by Albert Samain. The volume that made Samain's name as a poet, these melancholy verses are firmly placed within the symbolist genre.

perfection inherent in poetry, Mallarmé often utilized innovative syntax, complex metaphors, and experimental typography to create poems that challenge readers' perceptions.

Throughout his career, Mallarmé's insistence that the reader work with the poet in search of symbolic meaning, his disdain of immediate gratification in literature, and his vacillating poetic intentions also proved problematic; he intermittently suffered from depression and creative sterility. When a student announced, for example, that he had deciphered the meaning of one of Mallarmé's sonnets, the poet replied: "How wonderful! You have figured out in one week what has taken me thirty years." Although Mallarmé failed to achieve his goals, his small output forms an important contribution to the symbolist movement and contemporary poetry because it demonstrates his belief that the inexplicability of poetry can be consciously expressed through precise symbolic language. Guy Michaud explained: "[Mallarmé] liberated the poetic instrument once and for all from the harness of three centuries of rationalistic and French rhetoric, up to and including Romanticism. He . . . forcefully established that the function of the poet, and of the writer in general, is to decipher the mystery of the world."

While Mallarmé's oeuvre is small and has sometimes been faulted for being deliberately obscure and ambiguous, his influence on twentieth-century art and literature has been lasting and profound. In addition to having a direct impact on the poetry of his disciple Paul Valéry,

Mallarmé also inspired symbolist and avant-garde theater, surrealism, the New Novelists, and such respected writers as Franz Kafka and T. S. Eliot. Charles Morice emphasized the enormous effect of Mallarmé's complex and revolutionary verse on modern letters: "[Anyone] who has listened to him, dates from him."

### Works in Critical Context

Mallarmé was recognized by his contemporaries to be a highly influential innovator of French letters. Since his death in 1898, his reputation as the literary "Master of Symbolism" has grown steadily, reinforced by his ongoing influence on French literature. While critical response has not been without negative commentary on the difficulty of some of his works, by and large, Mallarmé has retained his status a significant literary figure of the nineteenth century whose work is deserving of both praise and scholarship.

**Experimental Poetry Yields a Mixed Critical Response** Mallarmé abandoned traditional grammar, vocabulary, and syntax in the majority of his poetry, but it is his final work, *A Throw of the Dice Never Will Abolish Chance*, which is considered his most experimental. Expressing his interest in the musical and polyphonic possibilities of the verse form, Mallarmé's words are set in different typefaces to produce visual representations of the poem's subject and to accentuate the intertwining of thought and sound. By tracing the fate of the ambiguous character known only as the "Master," Mallarmé attempts to recapitulate the role chance has played in the evolution of humankind. Although critics have praised Mallarmé's stylistic experimentations in *A Throw of the Dice*, they also note that the poem is occasionally strained and overambitious. F. C. Aubyn commented: "[Poetry] cannot be read exactly like music so . . . Mallarmé's harmonic intentions get lost in the typographical inventions. But its aesthetic beauty, visual as well as auditory, cannot be denied."

Mallarmé's teaching career and the demands of his disciples left him little time for writing in later years. Some of his finest works during this period are the short pieces he composed in honor of his colleagues, such as *Toast funebre*, written in 1873 to commemorate the death of the poet Théophile Gautier. In addition to celebrating Gautier's accomplishments, this poem also delineates Mallarmé's beliefs about the role of the artist in society and the meaning of poetry. Wallace Fowlie commented: "*Toast funebre* celebrates the essential paradox of poetry and of all art: the transitoriness of human experience fixed in a form of permanency." In 1875, Mallarmé wrote "The Tomb of Edgar Poe," a celebration of Poe's "eternal genius" despite his tragic life. Considered one of the greatest symbolist poems written in the late nineteenth century, "The Tomb of Edgar Poe" is one of the most frequently quoted works in French literature. In "Tombeau," his tribute to Paul Verlaine, Mallarmé disregards Verlaine's

controversial bohemian lifestyle, emphasizing instead the poet's unique contribution to French Symbolism. F. C. St. Aubyn underscores the poetic merit of Mallarmé's tributes: "Among [the 'tombs' and homages] are to be found some of Mallarmé's most famous and most difficult poems."

## Responses to Literature

1. Discuss the nature of obscure allegory in Mallarmé's verse. Do you feel such obscure analogies benefit a poem, or detract from it? Why?
2. Mallarmé's works have been described as "decadent." Do you agree with this? What evidence do you see to support this label?
3. What does Mallarmé mean when he uses the term *Transposition*?
4. Do you agree with Mallarmé's position that poetry is the only way to adequately express our feelings and that ordinary language is a disappointment? Are there other forms of communication that serve the same function as Mallarmé's conception of poetry?

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## Thomas Malory

BORN: c. 1410, Newbold Revel, Warwickshire, England

DIED: 1471, London, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485)

## Overview

Thomas Malory is recognized as a towering figure of medieval English literature. His masterwork, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), is the best-known treatment in English of the tales of the exploits and deeds of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Fought in Hundred Years' War** Malory's birth date is uncertain, but believed to be just before 1410. He was probably the son of John Malory, esquire, of Newbold Revel. As a young man, Malory served with the Earl of Warwick's forces in France. England had been at war with France since 1337 in what came to be known as the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). The conflict was over territories controlled by the English in France. At the war's end, England was expelled from the continent except for Calais.

**Criminal Activities** Malory succeeded to his father's estate in 1433 or 1434. Far from being the sort of man likely to write what William Caxton called a "Noble and Joyous book," Malory was a ruffian of the most extreme kind. He was indicted for theft in 1443 and served in parliament later in the decade. He is next heard of in 1450, when he evidently embarked upon an appalling career of rape, robbery, and brutal violence. All together, this "servant of Ihesu [Jesus] bothe day and nyght" (as he claimed of himself) was to spend years in prison for his crimes.

The most damaging document relating to Malory is the memorandum of an inquisition held at Nuneaton in 1451. Therein, it is stated that on January 4, 1450, Malory led an attempt to murder Humphrey, Duke of Buckingham. A few months later, he raped Joan Smyth of Monks Kirby, and the following week he extorted one hundred shillings from Margaret Kyng and William Hales. He raped Joan Smyth again on August 6, stealing forty pounds Sterling in goods belonging to her husband. On August 31 he extorted twenty shillings from John Mylner.

Almost a year later, on June 4, 1451, Malory and five others stole seven cows, two calves, a cart worth four pounds Sterling, and 335 sheep from a Warwickshire farm. He was arrested a month later and placed in custody, but he broke out of prison by swimming the moat. The very next day, he reconvened his band of abettors. That night, he led an attack on Coombe Abbey, stealing jewels, cash, religious objects, and other valuables. The next night, he returned to Coombe for more booty, this time inciting a riot in which he may have personally beaten the abbot bloody with a stick.

**Imprisoned** In spite of the seriousness of the charges brought at Nuneaton, Malory was never brought to trial for the crimes enumerated in the memorandum, though he was summoned in March 1452 to answer charges not sufficiently explained the year before. For a time, he

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Malory's famous contemporaries include:

- John Lydgate** (1370–1451): Monk and poet who was one of the most prolific English authors of the fifteenth century. His translations include the *Troy Book* (1412–1420).
- Johannes Gutenberg** (1400–1468): German printer credited with the invention of moveable type that revolutionized the printing industry.
- Joan of Arc** (1412–1431): A national hero of France who led the French army to several important victories during the Hundred Years' War before being martyred.
- Henry VI** (1421–1471): King of England for much of the fifteenth century, overseeing the end of and England's loss in the Hundred Years' War.
- Christopher Columbus** (1451–1506): Italian explorer credited as being the first European to land in the New World.
- Leonardo da Vinci** (1452–1519): Multitalented Italian who is often cited as the archetype of the "Renaissance Man." His paintings include the *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503–1506) and *The Last Supper* (1495–1498).

apparently continued his criminal enterprises, jumping bail in 1454 to avoid felony prosecution. He was subsequently imprisoned in Colchester, but escaped and was recaptured and sent to Marshalsea Prison. Malory was called before the King's Bench on January 16, 1456, and released on a royal pardon. He was sent to Ludgate, a debtor's prison, and released on bail in 1457.

**Wrote Book While in Prison** Malory soon was returned to prison, again at Marshalsea. His last recorded arrest came in 1460 when he was sent to Newgate Prison. It is believed that he completed *Le Morte d'Arthur* while serving time there. Nothing further is known of him until 1468, when he was specifically excluded from King Edward IV's general pardon of August 24. Malory died in March 1471, probably of the bubonic plague (a deadly bacterial infectious disease that was responsible for millions of deaths during this period), while still serving time at Newgate.

### Works in Literary Context

**Arthurian Background** It is Malory who gave Arthur to England, and who shaped the legend adapted into Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1855–1885) and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958). Arthur began as little more than a tribal chieftain. He was elevated by Geoffrey of Monmouth (who still claimed to

be writing history) in his *Historia regum Britanniae* (c. 1138) into a great and tragic hero whose queen is coveted by Mordred. The story grew to huge proportions through the vast prose romances, a "Holy Grail," a "Lancelot," a "Merlin," and a "Death of Arthur" written in France in the thirteenth century.

**Mythic Quality** Malory knew these French sources, but it is his vision that gives the Arthurian legend its mythic quality, as he tells of men (and women) who are doomed because they love each other too much. It is likely that Malory began his reworking of this material with a rather pedestrian handling of a story of Arthur at war, the book that turns up finally as Book 5, the story of the war between Arthur and Emperor Lucius. This book, different in kind and mood from the rest of Malory's output, is based on a native source, the fourteenth-century *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, rather than the French romances that support the rest of the work. In this tale, Arthur and his knights seem much more warriors than courtiers, and there is little sense that Malory put his individual stamp on these characters.

**Influence** The width and variety of response to *Le Morte d'Arthur* suggests the strong appeal of the work to a variety of readers. As the single greatest repository of Arthurian legend in English, its influence upon poets, novelists, and scholars has been tremendous. Equally, *Le Morte d'Arthur* has stirred the imaginations of generations of readers whose love of the Round Table and all it represents is abiding.

### Works in Critical Context

Malory's masterwork, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, is esteemed on several counts. It is a mirror of medieval culture and manners, a seminal work of English prose, and a narrative of enduring entertainment value. Yet *Le Morte d'Arthur* remains an enigma. Scholars are at odds about authorship, source material, authorial intention, narrative structure, and thematic content. Whatever puzzles it presents, however, *Le Morte d'Arthur* is an acknowledged literary milestone. In the words of critic William Henry Schofield, it is "the fountainhead of [English] Arthurian fiction."

**Two Key Editions** According to a statement at the end of the book, *Le Morte d'Arthur* was completed in "the six yere of the reygne of kyng edward the fourth," that is, between March 4, 1469, and March 3, 1470. It first saw print on July 31, 1485, in the workshop of William Caxton. Caxton's edition is divided into twenty-one books and 506 chapters. Caxton's was the only version known until 1934, when W. F. Oakeshott discovered a manuscript of *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the Fellows Library of Winchester College.

The Winchester text parallels the Caxton version closely except for the section treating Arthur's war with the Roman emperor Lucius, but it is a decidedly distinct text nonetheless. The manuscript, which was apparently

copied during the 1470s or early 1480s, is divided into ten parts, forming five larger units, corresponding to Caxton's Books I–IV, V–VII, VIII–XII, XIII–XVII, and XVIII–XXI. The manuscript was edited by Eugene Vinaver in 1947 as *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*. Its relationship to Caxton's version is not altogether clear and is the subject of ongoing discussion. All that is known for certain is that the manuscript did not serve as printer's copy for Caxton.

**Controversy** The chief controversy about Malory studies concerns the structural unity of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. As early as 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh criticized the "inevitably rambling structure" of the work. He claimed that "to attain to a finely ordered artistic structure was beyond Malory's power; the very wealth of legend with which he had to deal put it beyond him, and he is too much absorbed in the interest of the parts to give more than a passing consideration to the whole." Two decades later, George Saintsbury viewed Malory as a "compiler" as far as the narrative of *Le Morte d'Arthur* is concerned.

The discovery and publication of the Winchester Manuscript enriched the discussion. In the introduction to his edition of the text, Vinaver set forth revolutionary views. He maintained that, far from being a continuous narrative, *Le Morte d'Arthur* is a series of eight "separate romances." Caxton, he added, produced it as a single book under a "spurious and totally unrepresentative title." Hence Vinaver formulated the new title, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, to reflect this view. Vinaver's contention set the stage for a scholarly battle that has continued.

Vinaver himself never wavered from his conclusion, and his many writings on the subject won him powerful supporters. His critics, however, have pointed to Malory's own words as evidence of the unity of the work: "I pray you all, gentlemen and gentlewomen, that read this book of Arthur and his knights from the beginning to the ending." "This book" and "beginning to the ending" suggest, it has been claimed, a continuous narrative, not a series of independent tales. Internal evidence concerning continuity is often cited, but it is generally ambiguous and has been variously interpreted.

**Critical Concerns through the Centuries** The structural unity of *Le Morte d'Arthur* is such a dominant critical concern that other matters might seem relatively unimportant, but this is far from being the case. From its first printing onwards, readers and critics alike have embraced the work. Initially, commentators were at pains to demonstrate the historical veracity of Arthur and the Round Table. Caxton devoted nearly half of his preface to this matter, while William Stansby included a brief introduction to his 1634 edition in order to "confute the errors of such as are of an opinion that there was never any such man as king Arthur."

It was not until the late nineteenth century that *Le Morte d'Arthur* was "discovered" as a major work of literature. Before then, commentary focused more on

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Malory's work was one of the earliest and most influential versions of the Arthurian legend. Here are some other versions of King Arthur's life and deeds:

*Idylls of the King* (1856–1885), poetry by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Tennyson's cycle of poems relies heavily on Thomas Malory's work, with some expansions and changes.

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), a novel by Mark Twain. This novel is a modern reworking of the Arthurian legend that introduces the idea of time travel.

*The Once and Future King* (1958), a novel by T. H. White. This novel offers a personal reinterpretation of the Arthurian legend, updated for relevance in post-World War II England.

the entertainment value of *Le Morte d'Arthur* than on anything else. It took the textual pioneer H. Oskar Sommer and the aesthetic critic Andrew Lang to bring *Le Morte d'Arthur* into the mainstream of English literary history. Early commentators on the artistry of *Le Morte d'Arthur* viewed the work in practically ethereal terms. In the 1910s, Vida D. Scudder, a major early promoter of Malory, concluded: "Malory's style is truly 'the man.' It belongs to no school, is the result of no tradition. It is a gift from above."

Since Scudder's time, critics have explored many further aspects of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The "moral paradox" of a criminal author having written a work on "love, curtosye, and veray gentynesse" has emerged as a major concern, while such smaller issues as novelistic elements, characterization, allegorical imagery, "courtly love," time patterns, formulaic language, neologisms, and dialogue in the work have been treated repeatedly.

### Responses to Literature

1. Could any of Malory's female characters serve as role models for modern women? Write a paper that outlines your conclusions.
2. In what ways did Malory's personal life affect how he constructed his version of the Arthurian legend? Was he drawn to the Arthur story because it mirrored or differed from his life? Were there other myths or legends that his talents might have been useful for retelling if he had lived longer? Write an essay that offers your conclusions.
3. In the late nineteenth century, Mark Twain imagined what it would be like for a modern-day American to

time-travel back to King Arthur's day in his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Write a story that shows what an American of the twenty-first century would make of Arthur's court.

4. Chivalry is an important concept in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Write an essay that gives your personal definition of chivalry and explains your view on its place in modern society.

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## ■ David Malouf

BORN: 1934, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

NATIONALITY: Australian

GENRE: Fiction, poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*An Imaginary Life* (1978)

- Fly Away Peter* (1982)  
*The Great World* (1990)  
*Remembering Babylon* (1993)

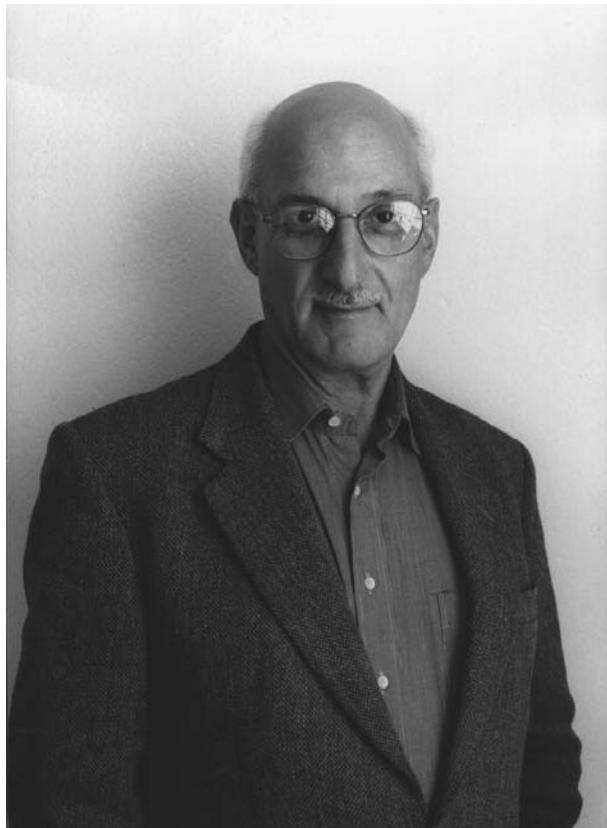
## Overview

David Malouf enjoys a distinguished reputation, nationally and internationally, as a writer whose lyrical mappings of identity, place, and the body also bear upon questions of belonging and national identity. Crossing successfully from poetry to prose fiction in 1975, Malouf continues to write in a wide variety of forms and genres.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Place of Return** David Malouf was born in Brisbane, Australia, in 1934 into a family of mixed British and Lebanese ancestry. Malouf's writing does not explicitly treat issues of ethnic minority or difference but instead draws upon European heritage in ways that engage primarily with the white mainstream of Australian literary culture.

After graduating with honors from the University of Queensland in Australia, Malouf departed for England, where he worked as a teacher from 1959 to 1968. On his return to his home country, Malouf took up a teaching post



David Malouf Malouf, David George Joseph, photograph. © by Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

in the department of English at the University of Sydney, where he taught for the next ten years. During this decade Malouf not only developed an increasingly sophisticated body of poetry but he also made his mark as a novelist with the publication of *Johnno* in 1975. Reviewers heralded this first novel as an innovative contribution to Australian writing, and thereafter Malouf's novels evolved in confidence, breadth, and complexity, ultimately earning him an international readership and reputation.

**Europe Translated** Upon winning a three-year fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council in 1978, Malouf retired from teaching to commit himself full-time to writing. To date, Malouf is the author of at least six volumes of poetry, several editions of selected poems, six novels, two novellas, three short-story collections, many autobiographical and prose nonfiction publications, a series of libretti for opera, and an original play.

Living alternately in Tuscany and Sydney, Malouf has been able to harness his expatriate experience to situate Australian writing in an international frame, promoting the imaginative re-creation of both Australian and European identities. In the words of Martin Leer, Malouf "sees Australia as producing 'critical variants of Europe': it is 'Europe translated.'"

### Works in Literary Context

Malouf's authorial range demonstrates unusual versatility, but his writing also exhibits remarkable consistency in approach, preoccupation, and style. Malouf advocates "a convergence of indigenous and non-indigenous understanding, a collective spiritual consciousness that will be the true form of reconciliation" in Australia. Malouf's writing maps encounters between self and other, tensions between exile and home, and relations between the individual and history—issues holding particular resonance for contemporary Australians. The transformations that, in Malouf's writing, are deployed to resolve these encounters—via death in the landscape, absorption into the other, experience of the limitless body, and immersion in the sacred—suggest the writer's belief in the efficacy and relevance of art, not merely as a powerful mode of expression but also as a strategy of belonging.

**The "Noble Savage"** Malouf's best-known work is the multiple award-winning *Remembering Babylon*. Updating the theme of the "noble savage," *Remembering Babylon* (1993) is set in nineteenth-century Australia and concerns Gemmy Fairley, an English citizen who is abandoned after making the crossing from Europe as a child. After living with the Aborigine people of Australia for a sixteen-year period, this "black white-feller" attempts to rejoin white Australian society, a community governed by European cultural norms and the English language. Variously regarded by some settlers as a curiosity, a potential ally against the Aborigines, and an object of scientific wonder, Gemmy is also viewed with fear, loathing, and distrust. His initiation into white society, particularly after

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Malouf's famous contemporaries include:

**Guy Debord** (1931–1994): Debord was a French author and Marxist philosopher best known for his book *Society of the Spectacle*.

**Mikhail Gorbachev** (1931–): Gorbachev was the last leader of the Soviet Union, serving from 1985 until its collapse in 1991.

**Joan Didion** (1934–): Didion is an American writer well known for both her novels and her essays.

**Jill Ker Conway** (1934–): Conway is an Australian-born author who served as Smith College's first woman president from 1975 to 1985.

**Halina Poswiatowska** (1935–1967): Poswiatowska was a Polish poet who is considered one of the most important writers in modern Polish literature.

he is seen conversing with blacks in the Aborigine dialect, culminates with several settlers attacking him. Eventually he abandons the "civilized" ways of the whites and rejoins Australia's indigenous community.

**Mixing Poetry and Prose** Though his fiction has made a greater public impact, Malouf's poetry displays an artistry considered by some (particularly his fellow poets) to equal—if not eclipse—his prose writings. For Ivor Indyk, Malouf "remains a poet, writing in the medium of prose." From the outset, Malouf's poetic voice has been infused by a sense of immediacy, an intimacy of address, and, as Dennis Haskell observes, an emphasis on "presentation of the self."

Observing both the gravity and inventiveness of Malouf's poems—their often "anecdotal starting point" and their "sense of intellectual searching"—Thomas W. Shapcott argues that "process is centre-stage in Malouf's poetic world." Malouf's poems sometimes prefigure his fiction, especially in their recourse to meditation and the resources of memory. As Philip Nielsen points out, "The Judas Touch," an early poem dedicated to "John Milliner: drowned February 1962," foreshadows Malouf's first novel, *Johnno*. Likewise, Laurie Hergenhan shows how elements of "The Year of the Foxes" prefigure elements of Malouf's later fiction.

**Experiments with the Novel Form** Malouf's novels do not merely repeat the preoccupations of his poetry in another form, they also experiment with the novel as form, playing with its temporal constraints and possibilities. The intimacy of the poet's voice is modulated by the linear drive of narrative. Through the novels, Malouf explores intimate personal terrain in ways that dramatize

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Malouf uses historical fiction set in Australia to explore difficult questions of national and personal identity. Here are some other works that touch on similar questions through historical fiction tied to specific colonial locations:

*A Lapse of Memory* (1907), a novel by Victor Segalen. This novel explores the nature of traditional Tahitian culture by depicting the rise of Christianity on the island and the subsequent destruction of traditional religion.

*Chaka* (1925), a novel by Thomas Mofolo. This novel, based on the life of Zulu warrior-king Shaka, or Chaka, is an epic tragedy that depicts traditional African culture prior to the rise of colonialism and Christianity.

*Strandloper* (1996), a novel by Alan Garner. This novel tells the story of William Buckley, who is transported to Australia, escapes, becomes an Aboriginal lawgiver and healer, and returns to England thirty years later.

questions of Australian history and national identity. Malouf's exploration of monumental or emblematic episodes in Australian history, however (World Wars I and II, for example) is never directed by a strongly "historical" focus but proceeds by means of subjective experience and encounter. The linear thrust of history is interrupted and slowed by the personal experience of time and the expansion of the narrative.

In Malouf's novels, recurring scenarios cumulatively produce an elaborate network of ideas. These thoughts include, for instance, the narrated recollection of place (particularly of domestic interiors); the playing out of a dynamic between male alter egos or twinned characters (such male pairings are often triangulated by the inclusion of a third, female character); and exploration of the figure or role of the artist.

### Works in Critical Context

Malouf's writings have been generally well received by both critics and readers. Literary scholars have focused on the postcolonial nature of his works, particularly his themes of personal and cultural identity, language, and nature. He has received praise from reviewers for his vivid, sensuous descriptions and evocative settings of his works. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1993 for *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf has been the recipient of many prestigious awards for fiction, poetry, and drama.

**From *An Imaginary Life* to *Remembering Babylon*** *An Imaginary Life* is arguably the most widely known and admired of Malouf's oeuvre (with the possible exception of *Remembering Babylon*, which bears many resemblances to *An Imaginary Life*). Both when

it was first published and during the subsequent years, the novel has attracted a great deal of critical attention, particularly as a text about the (post)colonial condition. For Gareth Griffiths, for example, *An Imaginary Life* suggests how texts can be "effectively open to the full complexity of the condition of post-colonial societies and the problems these societies now exhibit."

In the multiple award-winning *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf returns to the motif of the *enfant sauvage* (wild child) first treated in *An Imaginary Life*, reversing its narrative movement. Critics have lauded Malouf's focus on the relationship between politics, language, social stature, and personal and national identity in *Remembering Babylon*, praising the novel as a document of Australia's history and multifaceted population. Reviewers have additionally admired Malouf's use of the character Gemmy as a means of discussing the sublime in literature, the alienating and binding nature of language, and the paradox posed by the individual's need for acceptance and desire to distinguish between self and the "Other." In honoring Malouf with the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Fiction, judge Annette Smith stated: "Malouf's novel testifies all along to the confusion of languages. It demonstrates the demonic nature of words, both their destructive power and their creative force, as Gemmy's past and his new identity take form."

Though widely reviewed in glowing terms, Malouf's novel also sparked a critical debate in regards to its controversial politics. The book was published in the year in which the Australian High Court reversed the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* (a legal concept meaning "the land belonging to no one" used by the British to deny the claims of the indigenous people of Australia to their native land). *Remembering Babylon* has been criticized for authenticating white experience and history at the expense of Aboriginal bodies, experience, and history (as Germaine Greer, Suvendrini Perera, and Garry Kinane discuss). Some critics, such as Bill Ashcroft, counter this charge with the argument that the novel is subversive, representing "the very different, transformative oppositionality of post-colonial discourse."

### Responses to Literature

1. Some commentators have noted that Malouf is first and foremost a poet. In what ways do his poems influence his novels, and how do the concerns expressed in his novels show up in his poems?
2. Malouf makes use of the "noble savage" concept in his novel *Remembering Babylon*. In what ways does this concept show up in his other works? Does he seem to have a generally sympathetic or generally critical view of the "noble savage"? Can you compare his treatment of Gemmy to other characters from literature or film?
3. Malouf's writing explores the relations between individuals and the history through which they have

- lived. In what ways do you as an individual feel influenced by the history you have lived through? What events have had the largest subjective impact on you?
4. Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* was criticized for privileging white experience over Aboriginal history. Write an argumentative essay that either supports or opposes this criticism.
  5. Malouf's novels make use of descriptions based on his characters' recollections of certain places, particularly domestic interiors. Using only your memory, write a descriptive passage about a place that you feel you know well. If possible, return to this place after completing the piece to compare your recollection to reality.

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## André Malraux

BORN: 1901, Paris, France

DIED: 1976, Créteil, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, criticism

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Conquerors* (1928)

*The Royal Way* (1930)

*Man's Fate* (1934)

*Anti-Memoirs* (1967)

### Overview

Well known as a novelist, art critic, political revolutionary, and statesman, André Malraux is a prominent figure in the development of twentieth-century thought. He is considered by many a prototype for the existentialist thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. In his many works, Malraux portrays the human condition—"la condition humaine"—as a tragic state characterized by alienation and absurdity resulting from Western



André Malraux Malraux, André, Paris, France, 1967, photograph. AP Images.

civilization's loss of faith in God. His fiction is distinguished by frequent incidents of violence and rapidly paced plots that are governed by the force of ideas rather than events. His nonfiction is characterized by its tendency to be fictional.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Flirtations with Surrealism and with Orientalism** Malraux was born in the Montmartre district of Paris and raised in a nearby suburb. An avid reader, he turned his love of books into employment as a broker for a rare-book dealer, and he later edited a series of luxury editions of classical literary works. During the early 1920s, Malraux contributed literary criticism to avant-garde magazines and enhanced his appreciation of art by touring the museums and galleries of Paris. His first works of fiction, *Lunes en papier* (1921), illustrated by Cubist painter Fernand Léger, and *Royaume farfelu* (1928), demonstrate the influence of surrealism and constitute Malraux's only experimentation with fantasy literature.

In 1921, Malraux met and married Clara Goldschmidt, the daughter of a wealthy Franco-German family, who shared his love of art, literature, and film. Their archaeological expedition to French Indochina—now known as Vietnam and Cambodia—in 1923 proved a turning point in Malraux's life and work. While attempting to steal an invaluable sculpture from the ruins of a Khmer temple in Cambodia, Malraux was arrested and imprisoned by colonial authorities. He called on literary friends in Paris for support, and found it in spades. A flood of petitions got Malraux off the hook, and the whole experience, suggests biographer Olivier Todd, left him somewhat socially obligated to found *L'Indochine*, an anticolonial newspaper headquartered in present-day Vietnam. After the paper's closing in 1926, Malraux continued to protest colonialism in numerous articles and essays. His first major work of fiction, *The Temptation of the West*, was illuminated in part by these Asian adventures and explores Eastern and Western conceptions of existence. This work focuses on the theme of modern Western civilization's obsession with the individual, an issue that Malraux addressed throughout his career.

**Revolution in China** In 1925, while working for *L'Indochine*, Malraux reported on the nationalist uprisings in China, events that provided the basis for *The Conquerors*, his first full-length novel. Relayed through brief scenes that emphasize the chaos of revolution, this work marks the first appearance of Malraux's "new man," an individual aware of the absurdity of existence who combines, in Malraux's words, "a talent for action, culture and lucidity."

Malraux's third and most highly acclaimed novel, *Man's Fate*, won the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary award. In this work, Malraux returns to the settings and events of the Chinese revolution featured in *The Conquerors* to dramatize humanity's unmitigated solitude and the impossibility of finding permanent meaning.

**Communism and Brotherhood** With the rise of fascism in Europe during the 1930s, Malraux's political stance became explicitly communist. He viewed communism as a more powerful opposition to fascism than capitalism because it avoided capitalism's preoccupation with the self, an obsession Malraux had decried as early as *The Temptation of the West*. Critics interpret Malraux's next two novels, *Days of Wrath* and *Man's Hope*, as fundamentally propagandistic. *Days of Wrath*, an early literary exposé of Nazi atrocities, affirms the values of collectivism over individualism and demonstrates that "brotherhood" can furnish humanity with transcendent meaning. In 1936, along with many other leftist writers and artists, Malraux became involved in the Spanish civil war—first as a delegate from an international antifascist group, then as a procurer of arms and aircraft for the Spanish Republican army, and finally as the leader of an international air squadron. *Man's Hope* utilizes these experiences to illustrate Malraux's belief in the power of fraternity and to demonstrate his opposition to war.

**World War II, Resistance, and Public Service** Malraux enlisted in the French tank corps in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II. In 1940 he was captured by the Germans, but five months later he escaped to the French free zone, where, before joining the Resistance in 1942, he wrote his last novel, *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*. Through the memories of a prisoner of the Nazis, this work investigates humanity's attempts to deny its impermanence. *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg* offers reconciliation with a hostile universe through imagery associated with permanence and stability. After World War II, Malraux twice served in the government of President Charles De Gaulle, first as minister of information and then as minister of cultural affairs. In 1969, he retired from civil service and devoted himself to writing and revising his multivolume autobiography and continued this work until his death in 1976.

## Works in Literary Context

Malraux's work is best seen as an early example of what came to be known as French Existentialism. This philosophical position is most associated with French philosophers and novelists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. These thinkers felt that life is in some ways "absurd," because it contains no intrinsic meaning, leaving the individual fully responsible for the meaning of his or her life. Whereas Camus in particular explored the difficulty of knowing how to act in the face of the realization of the absurdity of life—and consequently wrote

protagonists who are afflicted with a kind of existential paralysis—Malraux's protagonists are characterized by their action and their attempts to attain brotherhood despite its ultimate meaninglessness. In the face of the dissolution of meaning, Malraux offers the concepts of “fraternité virile,” or a life-giving brotherhood, and metamorphosis, both precursors to Sartrean thought on intersubjectivity and the absolute freedom of human choice.

**Existentialism** Malraux sees humankind as existing in a state of alienation caused by a loss of faith—which he terms “la condition humaine,” or the human condition—and the awareness of the absurdity of a human existence lacking order and meaning. As he put it himself, “The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random among the profusion of the earth and the galaxies, but that in this prison we can fashion images sufficiently powerful to deny our nothingness.”

One gets a good sense of Malraux's existentialism in his third novel, *The Royal Way*. This novel illuminates Malraux's belief that death is not only a physical state, but also a metaphysical circumstance characterized by ignorance of the human condition and an unthinking acceptance of bourgeois values. Unlike existentialist protagonists in the works of Camus, characters who agonize over the possibility of meaningful action, however, Malraux's characters are impelled to act by their awareness of the abyss. Additionally, the disciple/mentor relationship between the two main characters is an early example of male bonding that Malraux eventually highlights in his fiction as a source of transcendent value in the form of brotherhood. Malraux's version of existentialism affirms the absurdity of death and the meaninglessness of life, but Malraux shows that this meaninglessness is not to be met solely with despair over the plight of humankind. Instead, in a conclusion much like that reached by Sartre in his focus on *intersubjectivité*, he offers the possibility that the lack of permanence—the fact that human beings die—necessitates that human beings act, build friendships, and love. In other words, Malraux says that since life is intrinsically meaningless, one must supply it with meaning through one's actions and friendships. The person who does this, Malraux deems the “new man.”

Although existentialism has its roots in thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Friedrich Nietzsche—all of whom died before Malraux was born—the French representation of the philosophy is quite different from its predecessors, mostly because of the historical context in which it arose. There is, in short, a sharper edge to the writings of the French existentialists. Unlike the early existentialists, French existentialists like Malraux and Sartre in particular developed their ideas in the face of World War II, and their presentation of the questions of meaning, life, death, and action found resonance in the world at large, suffering as it was from the holocaust logic imposed by the Nazis—and accepted to an unconscionable extent by the rest of the world.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Malraux's famous contemporaries include:

**Ho Chi Minh** (1890–1969): Vietnamese revolutionary who led the fight for independence from French and other outside rule in Indochina, culminating in the Vietnam War.

**Alan Paton** (1903–1988): South African author and political activist whose career is best remembered for his opposition to apartheid in South Africa.

**Elie Wiesel** (1928–): Romanian-born Holocaust survivor who described his experiences in a concentration camp in his memoir *Night*.

**Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980): French author who built upon Malraux's literary themes with his own existentialist works, such as *Nausea* (1938) and *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre famously declined the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964.

**Charles de Gaulle** (1890–1970): French general during World War II who went on to serve as president of France from 1959 until 1969.

Because of this peculiar historical context, French existentialism became a dominant philosophical mode for artists and authors in the twentieth century. The influence of these thinkers can be seen in the later work of many authors, including Samuel Beckett and Thomas Pynchon, each of whom explore the concept of the absurdity of life in their own fiction and drama.

### Works in Critical Context

Although Malraux's reputation rests on his novels—in particular *Man's Fate*, for which he won the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary award—and although his novels have found nearly universal acclaim, more recent critical attention has been paid to nontraditional aspects of his novels and, even more so, to Malraux's autobiographical material. In *Man's Fate*, for instance, critics have turned away from analyzing the merit of Malraux's representation of the existential dilemma and have begun to study the novel with a critical eye to Malraux's representation of women. As far as form goes, however, Malraux's autobiographical material has been deemed revolutionary for its transcendence of the limitations associated with more traditional autobiographies—a transcendence achieved by making the validity of self-perception one of the central questions of the text.

**Man's Fate** *Man's Fate* takes place in Shanghai in 1927, when General Chiang Kai-shek breaks from the Communist revolutionaries, thus beginning China's long and bloody civil war. The novel centers on several

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

After a long career as a fiction writer, Malraux set out to write his autobiography. Here are a few more examples of popular memoirs:

*Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961), an analytical memoir by Carl Jung. In this text, psychoanalyst Carl Jung recalls the major events of his life and offers psychoanalytical analysis of his dreams and memories—in essence, he turns himself into a patient.

*Chronicles* (2004), an entertainment memoir by Bob Dylan. Musician Bob Dylan discusses some of the pivotal moments in his life and career, focusing on his love for the work of other musicians, authors, and filmmakers. Throughout the text, however, the reader is aware of Dylan's admission that he has on numerous occasions lied to the media, thereby calling into question the validity of the memoir itself.

*This Boy's Life* (1989), a literary memoir by Tobias Wolff. Novelist and short-story writer Tobias Wolff describes his own childhood—including the abuse he suffered at the hands of his stepfather—in this memoir that was later turned into a film starring Leonardo DiCaprio as young Toby Wolff.

characters, mainly Chinese Communist conspirators and European adventurers, who are working against Chiang Kai-shek. These men also struggle against the meaningless solitude and absurdity that marks the human condition. Each searches for his own way to deny it, yet the solutions they seek individually, such as terrorism and torture, are all destructive and dehumanizing.

At the time of its release, *Man's Fate* was applauded by critics for its portrayal of both the acts and feelings of the characters. "I do not know of any modern book which dramatizes so successfully such varied national and social types," writes Edmund Wilson in *The Shores of Light*; "We not only witness [the characters'] acts and see them in relation to the force of the socio-political scene: we share their most intimate sensations."

More recent critical inquiry has focused on this novel's female characters and the psychology of Tchen, a terrorist whose severe isolation convinces him that absolute value lies only in acts of violence, but the novel continues to be regarded as crucial to the development of twentieth-century literature. As Christopher Hitchens writes in a review for the *New York Times*, "It pointed up the increasing weight of Asia in world affairs; it described epic moments of suffering and upheaval, in Shanghai especially (it was nearly filmed by Sergei Eisenstein); and it demonstrated a huge respect for Communism

and for Communists while simultaneously evoking the tragedy of a revolution betrayed by Moscow. It was, in short, the quintessential novel of its moment.

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *Man's Fate*. In the novel, Malraux depicts the Communist uprising in China that led to a civil war and ultimately the institution of a Communist government. In your opinion, how do his political and philosophical views color his depiction of events, if at all? Do you think a writer with different beliefs might have portrayed the same events in a different way? What does this suggest about the objective truth of accounts of historical events?
2. Read *Anti-Memoirs* and Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*. How do these two authors approach memoir differently? In your opinion, which one of these texts is more satisfying as a memoir? Why? Support your response with examples from the texts.
3. Although Malraux wrote about Nazi concentration camps, he was never imprisoned in one. In a short essay, compare Malraux's representation of Nazi concentration camps in *Days of Wrath* with their portrayal in the memoir *Night*, which was written by Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel.
4. After having read *Anti-Memoirs*, *This Boy's Life*, and *Night*, you are familiar with the characteristics of the memoir. Now try writing your own brief memoir. Consider some important episode in your life—your first love, your first funeral, your first year in high school—and write a memoir in which you explore your feelings and actions during this period of your life.

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## Demetrio Aguilera Malta

BORN: 1909, Guayaquil, Ecuador

DIED: 1981, Mexico

NATIONALITY: Ecuadorian

GENRE: Fiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Don Goyo* (1933)

*Loyal Spain* (1938)

*The Tiger* (1956)

*Seven Serpents and Seven Moons* (1979)

### Overview

Ecuadorian author Demetrio Aguilera Malta was a man of great talent and energy and is considered to be one of Ecuador's greatest writers of fiction. Many of his major works have been extensively anthologized and translated into English and other languages, and in the extensive critical literature on his works, Malta has been cited as one of the initiators of the magical-realist mode in Latin American fiction.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Young Witness** Malta was born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, on May 24, 1909, to Demetrio Flaviano Aguilera Sánchez and Teresa Malta Franco. He attended two primary schools, the Colegio San José and the Escuela Municipal Nelson Mateus, and received his secondary education at the Colegio Nacional Vicente Rocafuerte in Guayaquil. In 1922, when Malta was thirteen years old, he witnessed the massacre of striking workers by the police and military in the streets of Guayaquil, an event that left a profound impression on him. While the Radical Liberals were in power, as they had been since 1895, Ecuador kept church and state separated, and the liberty of thought, worship, and the press were put in place. However, there was some dissent as well as interludes of violence and crisis, despite the improving economic and social conditions in the country.

Malta was among the founders of the Ecuadorian Socialist Party in 1926. He then studied law for two years

at the Universidad de Guayaquil while attending classes at the Escuela de Bellas Artes. He spent five years on San Ignacio, one of the many islands in the Guayas estuary in the Gulf of Guayaquil, living with the people of Native American and African descent he would write about throughout his career.

**Published First Poem** Malta began his literary career during his adolescence with a poem, “Pages of Love,” published in the journal *Cromos* in 1924. He continued to publish his poetry in newspapers and journals, and worked on the journal *América*, which in the mid-1920s had an international reputation as the most important literary and ideological publication in Ecuador. He founded two literary journals, *Ideal* in 1924 and *Will* in 1927. With a student, Jorge Pérez Concha, he published a volume of poetry in 1927, *Primavera interior*. He published his own poetry book in 1929, *El libro de los mangleros*.

**The Group of Guayaquil** Throughout the 1930s and most of the 1940s, Malta supported himself as an educator, librarian, and journalist while writing his most important works. In 1930 he went to Panama, where he had his own column, *Sap*, in the *Diary of Panamá*. He also wrote for the *Star of Panamá* in Hoy while sending articles to the *Universe* in his native Guayaquil.

It was also in 1930 that Malta made his first important break into fiction when he contributed eight stories to *Those Who Go Away: Stories of the Coastal People*. This volume was published by Enrique “Gil” Gilbert and Joaquín Gallegos Lara, and along with Malta's writing included the work of José de la Cuadra and Alfredo Paraja Diezcanseco. Together, these five writers came to be known as the Group of Guayaquil, whose members were “five like a fist.” This fist they shook during the social-realist period of 1930s and 1940s Ecuador, writing major works of international acclaim.

**Interrupted by War** Malta joined the Republican forces of the Spanish Civil War and went to work as a reporter, sending off material on the war from Madrid. (The Spanish Civil War pitted the left-leaning Republicans, who had been in power since the early 1930s, against the right-leaning Nationalists, who removed the Republicans from power in a 1936 coup. Civil war resulted, lasting until 1939 when the Nationalist forces prevailed. General Francisco Franco, the leader of the Nationalist uprising, then consolidated his hold on power.) Later, Malta went to Barcelona, where he stayed until he left Spain, along with other international volunteers.

When Malta returned to Ecuador in 1937, he was appointed undersecretary for education. He founded another journal, *Tropic*, in 1938. He also began working in theater, writing his first dramatic work. No doubt inspired by his recent experiences in Spain and the need to champion the Republican cause, he wrote *Loyal Spain*

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Malta's famous contemporaries include:

**Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): Hemingway was an American writer. Like Malta, Hemingway was a reporter and supporter of Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War. His novels include *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952).

**Alfred Hitchcock** (1899–1980): Hitchcock was a British film and television director and producer. He is considered an icon for his pioneering suspense and thriller entertainment, his droll wit, and his unique style. His films include *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Rear Window* (1954), and *North by Northwest* (1959).

**Golda Meir** (1898–1978): Meir was the fourth prime minister of Israel and was known as the "Iron Lady" of politics.

**Zora Neale Hurston** (1891–1960): Hurston was an American folklorist and writer. She is often associated with the Harlem Group and a major influence for authors Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Hurston's books include *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

(1938), which deals with the social and political realities of the Spanish Civil War.

**Inspired Drama** In 1941, Malta was teaching literature at his alma mater, the Colegio Nacional Vicente Rocafuerte in Guayaquil. A new boys' high school was under construction in the city, but funds had run out before it could be completely furnished. Malta was asked to write a play to raise money to buy equipment for the school theater. The result was *Lazarus* (1941), the tragic story of an inspired schoolteacher who, out of personal poverty and lack of resources for public education, is driven to forsake his calling and invest his time and energy in menial activities to eke out a living. The play was an immense success, and has probably been staged more often than any other in Ecuador.

**Ambitious Years** From 1937 to 1943, Malta was also a visiting professor at universities in Guatemala, Mexico, Brazil, and the United States. In the late 1940s, he represented Ecuador at diplomatic posts in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. He also served with the Office for Intellectual Cooperation at the Pan American Union in Washington, D.C. In 1946, Malta worked with North American professor Willis Knapp Jones on the drama *Blue Blood* (1948), which concerns the influence of North America on Latin American culture.

**Success as a Novelist** It was also starting in the 1930s that Malta had established himself as a leading Ecuadorian novelist. After success as a contributor with *Those Who Go Away*, he abandoned the short story form to publish his first novel. With *Don Goyo* (1933), Malta had two goals: to portray the beauty, vitality, and genius of a group of coastal dwellers steeped in indigenous tropical-forest culture and to expose the mechanisms through which implacable economic forces from Guayaquil and the developed world bring about the destruction of a long-standing culture and viable way of life.

**Abandoned History** With his novel *The Virgin Island* (1942), Malta also presents the Ecuadorian coastal people, but expands on convention with two protagonists with contrasting worldviews—representative of the native and European cultural currents that coexist in much of Latin America. After several more works, during the 1960s Malta planned his *American Episodes*, a twelve-volume series of historical novels concerning the men, women, and events that make up Latin American history. Only three volumes of the series were ever completed.

During the 1970s, Malta published four novels that marked a departure from the style of his earlier work and demonstrated an intense interest in the new forms, techniques, and vision that had shifted the attention of the international reading public to Latin American fiction. However, he never lost his concern for authenticity and never abandoned Ecuadorian literary tradition.

**A Break from Realism** Ecuadorians speculated wildly about the mysterious kidnapping of a general in 1970. In writing *The Kidnapping of the General* (1973), Malta laid aside realism and tapped into a rich current of popular fantasy to produce a work at once humorous and bitterly complaining, yet marked with Malta's undying hope for the future of Ecuador and Latin America. In the early 1970s, Ecuadorian politics was tumultuous, with José María Velasco Ibarra winning yet another term as president in 1968, then suspending the constitution and assuming dictatorial power in 1970. Though Velasco promised elections in 1972, he was overthrown in a bloodless coup after refusing to give into the demands of senior army officers to postpone elections. General Guillermo Rodríguez Lara became the head of a new military government that lasted until he was ousted in 1976 and replaced by a three-member Supreme Council.

Malta then abandoned the purely mythical and returned to the geographically identifiable with *Jaguar* (1977). This novel, like the one to follow, borrows from Malta's other writing, taking from the settings, situations, and characters of *Don Goyo*, *The Virgin Island*, and *The Tiger* (1956).

**Experimental in Late Career** *Réquiem for the Devil* (1978) does the same. The final novel of Malta's career, it is a novelization of the author's 1967 play *Black Hell*. Just as the expressionistic play was Malta's most

experimental play, so did *Réquiem* become his most experimental novel. Malta once again focused on aspects of Ecuadorian reality that are taken for granted and amplified them to their absurd extreme in order to expose the contradictions of Ecuadorian life.

On December 29, 1981, Malta died in Mexico, where he had made his home with his second wife and collaborator, Velia Márquez, since 1958. He left behind one last, unfinished novel manuscript, *A Ball, a Dream, and Ten Cents*, published posthumously in 1988.

### Works in Literary Context

As a writer, Malta was greatly influenced by contemporary events and social concerns in his country, throughout Latin America, and such world events that he personally experienced, such as the Spanish Civil War. He was also well versed in history, philosophy, international relations, and the lives of certain peoples in his country, and included these ideas in his books. Thus, Malta often had a realistic base to his fiction and plays, though sometimes with fantastical or expressionistic elements. He is considered a leader in fictional social realism.

**Innovation in Novels** Malta's novels, starting in the 1930s, earned him a place in Ecuadorian literature as a leader of innovative technique. His 1942 *Virgin Island*, for instance, presents a bicultural, egalitarian relationship while denouncing native cultural traditions that will not suffice in the newly colonized and alien tropics. By the 1970s, Malta's innovative technique grew to include action that takes place in distorted settings, recurring characters experiencing multiple flashbacks, truncated plots, and places where the familiar and the mundane are mixed with the futuristic and unreal.

Such devices, as those in *Réquiem for the Devil* and *Seven Serpents and Seven Moons*, also include internal monologue, broken thought, different events occurring simultaneously, and mythical elements of African, Western, or Native American origin. Themes of particular importance to Malta and his work focused on social concerns. *Réquiem* and *Don Goya*, for example, are driven by themes of exploitation of the citizenry. *Canal Zone* evokes the racial prejudice held by North American whites against blacks in the isthmus area they occupy—a major theme that was a constant in Malta's works, not only in his novels but especially his plays.

**Influences** Malta's early fiction and his short stories in *Those Who Go Away* became his most important contributions to Ecuadorian and Latin American literature. The innovations in his early work charted new ground and pointed the way for other Latin American writers. Malta's later novels, especially *Seven Serpents and Seven Moons*, in turn owe much to the formal innovations associated with the Latin American New Novel. That is, Malta's later works are inspired by literature while the earlier ones take their inspiration directly from the reality he personally observed on the islands of the Guayas River.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who also wrote about social injustice:

*Another Country* (1962), a novel by James Baldwin. In this modern work, the author explores life in Greenwich Village, New York, including the damages of racism and the consequences of hedonism.

*Heart Mountain* (1989), a novel by Gretel Ehrlich. In this novel of epic range, the story focuses on the experiences of Japanese Americans interred in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, prison camp during World War II.

*A Theory of Justice* (1971), a nonfiction book by John Rawls. In this work, the author presents a philosophical discussion of the right to justice that is so great not even the collective society can overpower, eclipse, or take it away.

### Works in Critical Context

While little is written about Malta in a specifically critical context, it is largely acknowledged that he made an exceptional impact on Ecuadorian and Latin American literature. He gained international attention as a writer of fiction in 1930 as one “finger” of the “fist” known as The Group of Guayaquil. His fame draws heavily on his career as a novelist. Most remarkable today are his short-story contributions to *Those Who Go Away: Stories of the Coastal People*.

**Those Who Go Away** The book scandalized Ecuador. It also caught the attention of international critics who recognized its innovative qualities. Eight stories of similar style, by each of the three authors, are intermingled to emphasize the solidarity of the group. The metaphors, critics believe, reflect the world and psychology of the characters, and the dialogue imitates coastal Ecuadorian Spanish. Critics regard these stories as earthy accounts of dramatic incidents in the lives of rural coastal people and black people. Malta's “The Cholo Who Avenged Himself” and “The Cholo Who Hated Money,” are the two most frequently anthologized stories from the collection.

### Responses to Literature

1. Malta incorporated the geography and social concerns of Ecuador. Survey the social conditions of Ecuador from the 1930s to the 1970s. What effect did the country's geography, location, and cultural history have on the social issues Malta wrote about? Why do you think Malta and other Ecuadorians

## *Osip Mandelstam*

- became involved in the Spanish Civil War? Write a paper outlining your findings.
2. Consider the members of the Group of Guayaquil, writers who introduced social realism. Research the biographies of Malta's fellows—Joaquín Gallegos Lara, Enrique “Gil” Gilbert, José de la Cuadra, and Alfredo Paraja Diezcanseco. Did the others have the writing life Malta had? Did they get the same recognition? What other literary contributions, if any, did each make? With a group, create a presentation on each author and the group as a whole.
  3. Research social realism to come up with a working definition. What are the characteristics of socialism? What are the characteristics of realism? How do the two come together (overlap) to create the hybrid genre, social realism? Write an essay outlining your conclusions.
  4. Many Latin American writers have become associated with the literary style known as magic realism. What are the main characteristics of magic realism? How is it different from fantasy? Do you think Malta is a good example of a magic realist? Why or why not? Create a presentation that displays your conclusions for the class.

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## Osip Mandelstam

BORN: 1891, Warsaw, Poland

DIED: 1938, Siberia, Russia

NATIONALITY: Russian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Stone* (1913)

*The Morning of Acmeism* (1919)

*On Poetry* (1928)

“Stalin Epigram” (1933)

*The Voronezh Notebooks* (1980)

### Overview

Osip Mandelstam was a twentieth-century Russian poet associated with the Acmeist movement, which rejected the mysticism and obscurity of the Symbolists and attempted to restore clarity to poetic language. A diehard



Osip Mandelstam *Mandelstam, Osip*. From a photograph in Mandelstam. Cambridge University Press, 1973. Reproduced by permission of Clarence Brown.

nonconformist, his attempts to maintain his artistic independence after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 resulted in ostracism, exile, and ultimately, death in Joseph Stalin's labor camps. After Stalin's death in 1953 (and long after his own death), Mandelstam was "rehabilitated" and his work has undergone a revival.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Beyond the Pale, Childhood from Warsaw to St. Petersburg** Osip Emil'evich Mandelstam was born on January 3, 1891, in Warsaw, then a part of Russia, into a middle-class Jewish family. His father, a leather merchant, paid for permission for his family to leave the "Pale of Settlement" where most Jews lived. They settled in St. Petersburg, where they lived relatively free of anti-Semitic hostility. Mandelstam attended the Tenishev Commercial School, obtaining an excellent education. He began to write poetry while still in secondary school.

**"Towers We Can Build Ourselves"** Mandelstam described his ethnic background as "Jewish chaos," and he always experienced a tension between his Jewish home life and the Russian iteration of Western European culture. After graduating from Tenishev, he continued his education abroad, attending both the Sorbonne in Paris and the University of Heidelberg in Germany. Fluent in French and German, he learned enough Italian to quote lines from Dante by heart. Back in Russia by the fall of 1911, he enrolled in St. Petersburg University. Like some nonreligious Jews seeking career advancement, he converted to Christianity (though not the state-sanctioned Russian Orthodox Church).

While still a student, he joined the Guild of Poets and grew close to poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova. A new literary movement, called Acmeism, emerged from the gatherings of this guild, with Mandelstam as one of its leaders and theorists. The Acmeists disdained what they considered the vagueness and excessive metaphysical bent of Symbolism, Russia's dominant poetic genre at the time. The Acmeists sought not to fly too high, Mandelstam wrote, but rather "to rise only to the level of towers we can build ourselves."

His first collection of poetry, *Stone* (1913), exhibits the transition from Symbolism to the new Acmeist aesthetic. The poems are direct, intuitive expressions of thoughts, feelings, and observations. They celebrate triumphs of culture such as feats of Roman and Byzantine architecture, and the city of St. Petersburg itself. The collection immediately established Mandelstam in the upper echelon of Russian poets.

**A Nonconformist: Putting Self before State** Unfortunately for Mandelstam, the 1910s were hardly a prosperous decade for establishing oneself as a poet in Russia. Before the First World War came to an end, Russia erupted in 1917 into revolution, and the Bolsheviks

who took control soon began bending art, and artists, to propagandistic ends. Mandelstam had supported the revolution early on, but had difficulty applying his creativity to the political ends of Russia's new government. Instead, he promoted his own humanism, and soon earned reproach from those artists and intellectuals who saw service to the State as the highest form of humanism. Legend has Mandelstam exhibiting his independence of mind at a party in 1918: When he saw Yakov Blumkin, the deputy chief of security, drunkenly signing execution orders for alleged counterrevolutionaries, Mandelstam snatched the papers and tore them to shreds.

In 1919, he met his future wife, Nadezhda Iakovlevna Khazine. They were married in 1922 and moved to Moscow, the year the revolution achieved its own consolidation and the Soviet Union as such was formed. Their acquaintance that year with Nikolai Bukharin, a leading figure in the government, proved a very helpful relationship over the next decade. That year, Mandelstam also published his second poetry collection, *Tristia*, a book that implicitly celebrates the individual over the masses and love over comradeship—subversive views in a Communist society.

The Mandelstams returned to St. Petersburg, now called Leningrad, in 1924—the year of the death of Vladimir Ilych Lenin, leader of the revolution and early Soviet Union. It was becoming increasingly difficult for the nonconformist Mandelstam to maintain himself as a poet. He never joined the groups that controlled the literary scene under the progressively intrusive guidance of the Communist Party. Other artists who had adopted his defiant stance, such as Nikolai Gumilev, had already been executed. He made a living as a translator, journalist, and children's writer. In 1925, however, he published an autobiographical prose work, *The Noise of Time*. The authorities were again displeased with this work's emphasis on its author's personal story.

**Scandal and Exile** In 1928, the year Josef Stalin consolidated his rule of the Communist Party and with it the Soviet Union, Mandelstam—despite continued antagonism from state officials—managed to produce three more volumes: *The Egyptian Stamp*, a surreal, stream-of-consciousness novella about the sufferings of a Russian Jew; *Poems*, his final and most complete collection of poems in a more complex style reflecting his maturation as a lyricist; and *On Poetry*, a collection of his literary criticism. The influence of Bukharin, a poetry enthusiast in Stalin's ruling circle, helps explain Mandelstam's success at getting his work into print.

His fortunes changed the following year, when he was falsely accused of plagiarism. Mandelstam was exonerated, but the scandal and negative publicity damaged his reputation. Bukharin interceded and managed to have Mandelstam and his wife sent to Armenia as journalists. After a six-month journey, Mandelstam returned in 1930; his travel account, *Journey to Armenia*, was the last work

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mandelstam's famous contemporaries include:

**Anna Akhmatova** (1889–1966): A Russian poet and an Acmeist colleague of Mandelstam's, whose work was suppressed under Stalin.

**Alexander Blok** (1880–1921): A Russian Symbolist poet, a leading figure of the so-called silver age of Russian poetry.

**Mikhail Bulgakov** (1891–1940): A Russian novelist and playwright; his satirical novel *The Master and Margarita* circulated underground in the Soviet Union.

**T. S. Eliot** (1888–1965): An Anglo-American poet, leading modernist, critic, and author of "The Waste Land."

**James Joyce** (1882–1941): An Irish expatriate novelist, author of *Ulysses*; one of the most celebrated twentieth-century novels.

**Joseph Stalin** (1879–1953): The dictatorial leader of the Soviet Union from the late 1920s until 1953.

he published during his lifetime. It appeared in 1933 in the literary magazine *Zvezda* (Star), whose editor lost his job for publishing it.

Mandelstam sped his own demise when he wrote, in 1933, a satirical poem characterizing Stalin as a gleeful executioner with a cockroach moustache. This sixteen-line poem, known as the "Stalin Epigram," may have been Mandelstam's response to the great famine brought about by Stalin's policies of agrarian collectivization—where individual farmers were forced to turn their crops over to the government for distribution. Mandelstam read the offending poem to a small group, and was soon arrested and tortured. Quite likely, Bukharin saved his friend from execution or the notorious labor camps—this time. Instead, Mandelstam was exiled to the Ural Mountains. After he attempted suicide in a hospital in Cherdyn, his sentence was softened, and eventually he was allowed to settle in Voronezh, a provincial capital south of Moscow. He wrote three notebooks of haunting poetry there, fearlessly depicting his hardships and criticizing the murderous Stalin. His wife preserved these documents and published them after his death as *The Voronezh Notebooks* (published posthumously in 1980).

**Death and Rehabilitation** By May of 1937, Mandelstam's sentence was over, but he and Nadezhda were not allowed to settle within one hundred kilometers of Moscow. The state had seized their house; homeless and destitute, he suffered two heart attacks. Furthermore, the literary establishment attacked him in print, and he was rearrested as a counterrevolutionary in May of 1938—at the behest of the General Secretary of the Leningrad

Writers' Union. He was sentenced to five years in a Siberian labor camp, and died that December of an unknown illness while in transit. He was one of millions to die in connection with Stalin's deeply paranoid state security policies, which encouraged denunciation of one's fellows and punished suspected "enemies of the state" with implacable ferocity, if also a certain arbitrariness.

After Stalin's death, Mandelstam was posthumously deemed rehabilitated and exonerated of the charge of counterrevolutionary activity. His widow, Nadezhda, published two memoirs in the 1970s, which helped revive interest in his writing. Mandelstam has come to be recognized, particularly in the West, as one of the Russian language's greatest, most inspiring poets.

### Works in Literary Context

Mandelstam was a Russian "Westernist" who derived much of his inspiration from sources foreign to his cultural background, including Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, French Symbolists such as Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine, and the classical mythology of the ancient Greek world. Mandelstam's poetry is rich in quotations from and allusions to both Russian and world literature, art, music, and architecture; a great deal of cultural knowledge is necessary to fully appreciate Mandelstam's work.

**From Symbolism to Acmeism** As a young man in St. Petersburg, Mandelstam attended the literary salon of Viacheslav Ivanov, the well-known Symbolist poet, whose work encompassed metaphysical, occult concerns. Mandelstam's early poetry is clearly influenced by Ivanov in its Symbolist imagery and neo-Romantic ethos, but he broke away when he joined the Guild of Poets with Gumilev and Akhmatova. In 1913, Mandelstam penned *The Morning of Acmeism*, the manifesto for the new movement. The Acmeists would steer away from Ivanov's mysticism toward its polar opposite, order and clarity. Their voice would be direct and unpretentious, and it would embrace as supreme the achievements of human culture. Mandelstam's first book of poetry, *Stone*, is considered the movement's finest achievement—the acme of Acmeism.

**Time and the Word** *Stone* introduces the reader to aspects of Mandelstam's verse that are apparent in later collections. His poetry is logocentric—defined by language, the organ through which man perceives and tries to master the world. "The living Word," manifested in many ways, is one of Mandelstam's main themes. The theme of time is also central to Mandelstam's poetry. He embraces a "pan-chronic" vision, in which memory can link vast distances in space and time to form an organic whole. Prime examples of this vision are his poems devoted to great edifices, such as "Notre Dame" (1913), in which the poet connects biblical Eden, ancient Egypt and Rome, the Gothic Middle Ages, and the modern day. Similarly, in "Hagia Sophia" (1913), there is a

communion of classical, Christian, and contemporary figures.

## Works in Critical Context

Mandelstam's poetry combines the virtues of musicality and intellectual challenge. It can be read and appreciated on different levels. Some commentators have derided his verse, with its refined aesthetic and copious references to works of art and architecture, as dispassionate and detached from the concerns of the world outside art. Other critics have demonstrated, however, that Mandelstam was sensitive to and often reacted to the events of the rapidly changing world around him. The poem "The Age" (from his 1928 collection), for example, expresses his hopes and apprehensions for the future of postrevolutionary Russia.

In the years since his rehabilitation, Mandelstam has been recognized as one of the most important Russian writers of the twentieth century, most significantly in his homeland, where he was once reduced to the status of literary "nonperson." During the Cold War, his work gained widespread attention in the West. His verse has been translated into many languages and published in many collections. The scholarly literature on him is voluminous and growing rapidly. Generally, the poems in *Stone* and *Tristia* are judged superior to those produced in the 1930s; however, recent studies of his later poetry take issue with this view. As Ervin C. Brody writes in his introduction to *Poems from Mandelstam*, a collection translated by R. H. Morrison:

No Soviet poet of modern sensibility reflected so intensively as Mandelstam the loss of historical and philosophical self-assurance and the emerging discrepancies between state order and the isolation of individual consciousness.... He was chiefly concerned with the preservation of Russia's cultural and moral heritage, and his best poetry attests to the survival of art and consciousness.

## Responses to Literature

1. For Mandelstam, what is the relationship between architecture and poetry? In your opinion, why do his poems and critical essays contain so many references to Gothic cathedrals?
2. Define Acmeism as Mandelstam understood it and practiced it. Why do you think Mandelstam and other Acmeists rebelled against the ideals of the Symbolist movement? Do you think historical events in Russia played a part in the creation of Acmeism?
3. What did Mandelstam mean when he distinguished the "friends and enemies of the Word" in Soviet Russia, in his essay "On the Nature of the Word" (1922)?
4. Research the situation of artists and writers in Stalin's Russia. What choices did they face? Consider the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Osip Mandelstam is famous for the "Stalin Epigram" that led to his arrest. Epigrams—concise, witty statements in prose or verse—have a time-honored role in language and literature. Here are some representative works from some of the greatest practitioners of the epigram.

*Epigrams* (first century CE), a collection of epigrams by Martial. Considered the creator of the epigram, this Roman poet wrote twelve books of them, most in "elegiac couplets."

*An Essay on Criticism* (1711), a poem by Alexander Pope. A poem of literary advice, written in "heroic" rhyming couplets and containing such famous phrases as "A little learning is a dangerous thing" and "To err is human, to forgive divine."

*Wit and Wisdom from Poor Richard's Almanack* (1732–1758), an almanac by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's annual publication always contained pithy phrases, such as "Haste makes waste."

*Epigrams of Oscar Wilde* (2007), a collection of epigrams by Oscar Wilde. A selection of witticisms from the outrageous Victorian satirist's plays, novels, essays, and poems, such as: "I can resist everything except temptation."

stories of the three leading Acmeists: Mandelstam, Nikolai Gumilev, and Anna Akhmatova. Why do you think artists like Mandelstam deliberately defied Stalin and his supporters even though they knew it could lead to their deaths?

5. Comparing *The Voronezh Notebooks* to Mandelstam's earlier volumes of poetry, speculate on how persecution under Stalin affected the poet artistically and/or psychologically.

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## Thomas Mann

BORN: 1875, Lübeck, Germany

DIED: 1955, Kilchberg, Switzerland

NATIONALITY: German

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Buddenbrooks: Decline of a Family* (1901)

"Death in Venice" (1912)

*The Magic Mountain* (1924)

*Doctor Faustus* (1947)

### Overview

Considered one of the foremost twentieth-century German novelists, Thomas Mann gained fame for ironic and philosophical works that reflected the doubts and fears of his era. Mann's epic novels and short stories highlighted the struggles and psychology of intellectuals and artists, exploring philosophical issues as he investigated German national identity. Praised as the peer of writers like James Joyce, Mann won the 1929 Nobel Prize for Literature and achieved international acclaim during his lifetime.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Shared Interest in the Arts** Thomas Mann was born on June 6, 1875, in Lübeck, Germany. (Germany had only recently been unified by Otto von Bismarck in



Thomas Mann Mann, Thomas, photograph. The Library of Congress.

1871.) Mann's father, Thomas Johann Heinrich Mann, was a well-to-do merchant. His mother, Júlia da Silva Bruhns, was born in Brazil and was the daughter of a German planter and a woman of Portuguese-Creole descent. Faced with Lübeck's failing economy, Mann's father wished that two of his sons, Thomas and Heinrich, would take over positions at the helm of the family business.

However, their father's death in 1891, when Mann was sixteen years old, freed up the brothers to pursue their growing interest in the arts, though Mann would retain a suspicion of artists and nonbusiness pursuits for the rest of his life. Heinrich Mann went on to become an outstanding novelist and essayist, and even Mann's younger brother, Viktor, made a name for himself with a 1948 family chronicle.

Though Mann was bright, he hated school. He worked briefly in an insurance company, but, increasingly influenced by music and literature, he soon tried his hand at writing. He found inspiration in culture, philosophy, and opera. Mann was infatuated with the Romantic music of Richard Wagner as a teen, but became skeptical of Wagner's power as he grew older. Mann also read the work of German philosophers like Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, exploring the idea of free will and the individual's relationship to society. These diverse influences would lead to a flexibility of style that would become Mann's literary trademark.

**Early Success with Novels** After writing a short story when he should have been working, Mann found himself a published author. The story, which gained Mann a letter of appreciation from prominent poet Richard Dehmel, encouraged Mann so much that he quit his job and began auditing courses at the University of Munich. By the time his first book, *Little Herr Friedemann*, was published in 1895, Mann had gone to Italy with his brother Heinrich.

**Fruitful Excursion to Italy** Though Heinrich was enthusiastic about the Italian language and culture, Mann was alienated from Italian society and spent most of his three-year stay discovering Russian, Scandinavian, and French literature and writing a book inspired by his ancestors. *Buddenbrooks: Decline of a Family* (1901) was unlike most German literature of the time. Drawing from Scandinavian and western European naturalistic novels, *Buddenbrooks* told the story of a German merchant family through lavish detail, poorly concealing the fact that it was based on Mann's own family and his hometown of Lübeck.

Stunted by writer's block after a series of literary failures, Mann went to Venice with his wife, Katia Pringsheim, whom he had married in 1905. There, he met a cast of exotic and strange characters who would appear in his short story, "Death in Venice" (1912). The story, which deals with a writer's obsession with a younger boy, has received international acclaim as an example of a major short work of fiction, exploring atmosphere, characterization, and motifs of death and repression in vivid detail. The work also created controversy with its depiction of homosexual love.

**Political Controversy** The advent of World War I drove a wedge between Mann and his brother Heinrich. By the early 1910s, Germany had become the strongest military, industrial, and economic power on the European continent and was involved, as many countries of the time were, in an elaborate system of alliances. After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, by a Bosnian terrorist in Serbia in 1914, all these alliances came into play, and World War I broke out. Under the leadership of Emperor Wilhelm II, Germany had initial success in the war, allied with Austria-Hungary and Turkey against the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and, later, the United States. Ultimately, Germany was defeated, and 1.6 million Germans died in the conflict.

Though Mann's brother Heinrich took a stand against the atrocities of World War I, Mann himself encouraged the war effort, adopting a nationalistic position. The brothers' conflict reflected German society's debate about its place in history. Around this time, Mann published his controversial *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man* (1918), a nationalistic book celebrating Germany's unique heritage. The book was later embraced by ultra-conservative Germans for its anti-European stance. Though Mann would later change his views on German society's benefits, he would keep arguing for the remainder of his life that Germany was different from the rest of Europe. Criticized as fascistic and out of touch with reality, the book remains Mann's most controversial work.

**Postwar Nobel Prize** Though Mann had embraced conservatism in print, he was converted to the new democratic principles adopted in Germany after World War I. Germany became a republic, governed under the liberal

Weimar Constitution. However, the 1919 Treaty of Versailles demanded that Germany nearly totally disarm, lose all its colonies and territories gained in the Franco-Prussian War, and accept stringent reparations requirements. Thus, Germany suffered a series of economic and social dislocations in the postwar period. Mann's waffling between two political ideals was reflected in German society as it moved from imperialism to democracy to fascism.

Around this time, Mann began working on *The Magic Mountain* (1924), the novel that is now considered a landmark in world literature. Set in the years leading up to World War I, the book takes place in a sanatorium on a mountaintop in Switzerland and depicts a young man's struggles to find meaning in life against a backdrop of death, illness, and extremism. The book appeared to a tidal wave of favorable criticism, gaining comparisons to Proust's epic *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927), winning Mann the Nobel Prize for Literature, and solidifying his position as one of the world's greatest storytellers.

**Forced into Exile by Nazis** Mann's life once again intersected with politics when he was discouraged from returning to now-Nazi Germany from a vacation in the early 1930s because his wife was Jewish. By this time, Adolf Hitler had taken power in Germany, and he converted the republic into a dictatorship. Under Hitler's leadership, Germany greatly expanded its military and adopted a tone of extreme nationalism. As part of the Nazi agenda, Jews had their civil rights taken away and were later interned and killed en masse as part of the government's policy.

Mann decided to tread lightly, avoiding open criticism of the Nazis, but these actions earned him the scorn of antifascist groups. Tired of being cautious, Mann issued a set of strong statements against the regime. The consequences were quick and brutal: his German citizenship was revoked in 1936 and his honorary doctorate from the University of Bonn was taken away. Unswayed, Mann responded with an open letter that gained worldwide attention. "Woe to the people which... seeks its way out through the abomination of war, hatred of God and man!" warned Mann. "Such a people will be lost." Though he had initially feared speaking out against the Nazis, Mann's actions and his Nobel Prize status turned him into a leading representative of German progressive thought.

**Became American Citizen** Now an exile, Mann moved to the United States in 1938 and became an American citizen in 1944. He began to tackle the Nazis through his fiction, writing a series of books about ancient Jewish history and eventually moving on to an outspoken critique of German culture and its contribution to the oppressive Nazi regime. While Germany had early success in World War II, the Nazi regime was ultimately defeated by the Allies (Great Britain, France, and, later, the United States). After Hitler's suicide in 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered. As Germany was occupied by the winners of the war and strove to rebuild in the postwar period, Mann's own struggle

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mann's famous contemporaries include:

**Georg Lukács** (1885–1971): Hungarian philosopher and literary critic known for founding the Western Marxist tradition. His books include *History and Class Consciousness* (1923).

**Kaiser Wilhelm II** (1859–1941): Emperor of Germany and king of Prussia from 1888 until 1918, he was forced to abdicate his throne in the final months of World War I.

**Henri Bergson** (1859–1941): Prominent French philosopher noted for his writings on time and consciousness.

**Marcel Proust** (1871–1922): French author famous for his massive, complicated work *In Search of Lost Time*, published in sections between 1913 and 1927.

**Gertrude Stein** (1874–1946): An American writer famous for her Paris literary salon of the 1920s and such works as *Tender Buttons* (1914).

with the German culture with which he so closely identified was reflected in his 1947 book *Doctor Faustus*. This complex novel met with mixed critical reviews. Though the book was not popular, it is considered to be a summary of Mann's artistic vision.

Mann continued to be a controversial figure in the postwar period. Though he won many prestigious awards in Europe, he was blasted by German writers who had been compromised by Nazism. He finally returned to now-divided Germany, touring both sides in an attempt to gain reconciliation, but was immediately denounced in the United States for his supposed Communist sympathies. (The democratic West Germany was under the influence of Western powers like the United States, while the Communist East Germany was controlled by the Soviet Union, who had joined the Allies late in World War II.) Upset by his adopted homeland's intolerance, he moved to Switzerland, returning to a once-abandoned novel, *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence-Man*, a humorous picaresque novel that depicts the artist as a criminal. He died on August 12, 1955, just two months after his much-celebrated eightieth birthday.

### Works in Literary Context

Mann is known for his lengthy, complex style and his exploration of German language, literature, and culture. Vivid in detail and description, his novels explore artistic figures in great depth and reflect influences of German culture, music, and philosophy. Germany's tumultuous history in the first half of the twentieth century also greatly affected Mann's output. In addition, Russian,

Scandinavian, and French literature also proved inspirational to Mann.

**Exploration of German Culture** As a child, Mann was influenced by his Brazilian mother's love of culture and art and his German father's love of business and order. Raised in a literary family, Mann was immersed in German language and literature. He tackled his German literary heritage in works like *Lotte in Weimar* (1939) and *Doctor Faustus*. These books directly questioned and reimagined works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of Germany's most esteemed writers. In his quest to describe and define German culture, Mann managed to alienate an entire generation of Germans who were turned off by his conservative and nationalistic message. However, his ideas and philosophies changed as World War II affected his personal life, and he was later known for speaking out against German nationalism. He is famed for his emphasis on humanism (a philosophy that focuses on the inherent worth of all people) and his celebration of Western culture.

**The Artist's Place in Society** One of the central themes in most of Mann's stories is the place of the artist in modern society. Many of his main or supporting characters are artists of some sort, such as the author Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*. In *Doctor Faustus*, the composer Leverkühn sells his soul to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of musical success. While he is depicted as existing outside the norms of society, the book also suggests that such artists are actually the heart and soul of a culture. After his successful career, Leverkühn spends a decade in an increasingly deteriorating mental state, unable to function in any normal way. This parallels the decade during which Nazism rose to prominence in Germany—a time of cultural deterioration during which artists fled the country, were imprisoned, or were killed.

**Reimagining Existing Literature** Throughout Mann's body of work are many examples of his extensions and reimaginings of existing pieces of literature. As mentioned previously, his novels *Doctor Faustus* and *Lotte in Weimar* are, respectively, an update of and a response to two of Goethe's most well-known works. In addition, his four-book epic *Joseph and His Brothers* is a retelling of a portion of the Bible's book of Genesis. Even "Death in Venice" has been viewed by scholars as a recasting of ancient Greek mythological characters into a modern setting.

**Influence** Mann's own work influenced writers as diverse as Franz Kafka, Michel Houellebecq, and Orhan Pamuk.

### Works in Critical Context

Known as much for cultural controversy as his great works of literature, Mann is commonly heralded as the most important German writer of the twentieth century.

However, critical response to his works varied during his lifetime, with many critics blasting his tendency to write wordy, overblown, and confusingly complex novels. Though Mann's work has gained international acclaim, he is often cited as hard for non-German speakers to appreciate, in part because of his close identification with uniquely German ideals and cultural norms.

**Buddenbrooks** Mann's early literary career was marked by success, with his first novel published by Samuel Fischer, a renowned literary firm that still upholds a high standard in German literature. *Buddenbrooks* brought him his first taste of literary scandal when his thinly veiled portrait of northern German society was recognized. With its detached portrayal of grasping capitalism and insensitive townspeople, it shocked many Germans. Still, the book received high critical praise, with Rainer Maria Rilke, a noted poet of the time, praising the book as giving "evidence of a capacity and ability that cannot be ignored." Thomas Rockwell, in *Preface to Fiction: A Discussion of Great Modern Novels*, states that the tragedy of the novel "is effected in a manner which brings out the beauty inherent in decay," and that with his skill at subtlety, Mann "established himself as perhaps the foremost contemporary writer of German prose."

**The Magic Mountain** When it was published in 1924, critics praised *The Magic Mountain* as marking "a return to his rightful standing [as] the master novelist of his age." Upon its publication, a reviewer for *Time* proclaimed, "The author displays an intellect profound, searching, inclusive, an artistry profound and subtle in all his works." Henry Hatfield, in *Thomas Mann* (1951), states of the novel: "Employing a microscopic closeness of observation, it adds a new dimension to the realistic novel, while at the same time it marks Mann's major shift to the use of mythical patterns." Hatfield also calls the book "one of the most imposing structures erected by the modern mind."

## Responses to Literature

1. Mann was condemned for his nationalistic political writings. Do you think that Mann's political views should shape criticism of his literary work? Why or why not? Write an essay that outlines your conclusions.
2. Mann's work is known for its length and complexity, features he drew from influences like Russian and Scandinavian novels of the nineteenth century. Using the Internet and your library, write an essay on the distinguishing features of nineteenth-century Russian fiction.
3. Mann was born into a literary family. Using the Internet and your library, write a paper on another famous literary family and their accomplishments.
4. During his career, Mann turned from supporting German nationalism to speaking publicly against

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Thomas Mann's use of other writers' works as inspiration for his own is not uncommon. Here are some more examples of works that were inspired by the creations of other writers.

*Pygmalion* (1913), a play by George Bernard Shaw. This play updates Ovid's ancient tale of a sculptor who falls in love with his creation. In Shaw's version, the sculptor is replaced by a linguist named Henry Higgins, and his "creation" is a lower-class flower girl whom he teaches to act like a lady of high society.

*Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), a novel by Gregory Maguire. The novel is set in the same universe as L. Frank Baum's series of Oz novels, but is told from the perspective of the Wicked Witch of the West.

*Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (1956), a novel by C. S. Lewis. This novel is an alternative take on the myth of Cupid and Psyche as told by the ancient Roman Apuleius in *The Golden Ass* (c. 158 c.e.). Lewis's version of the story is told from the point of view of Psyche's sister Orual.

*O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), a film by Joel and Ethan Coen. The film takes many elements from Homer's ancient Greek epic the *Odyssey* (c. late 700s B.C.E.) and transplants them into Mississippi in 1937.

fascism. Using the Internet and your library, create a presentation on the rise of fascism in Germany and its implications for German political and cultural stability.

5. One of Mann's primary interests was the relationship of artists to society. What place do you think an artist should hold in society? Are artists obligated to support or to question cultural values? What about artists whose aim is primarily to entertain? Write a paper that outlines your views.

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## ■ Katherine Mansfield

BORN: 1888, Wellington, New Zealand

DIED: 1923, Fontainebleau, France

NATIONALITY: New Zealander

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

"Bliss" (1920)

"Miss Brill" (1920)

"The Garden Party" (1922)

## Overview

Katherine Mansfield is a central figure in the development of the modern short story. An early practitioner of stream-of-consciousness narration, she applied this technique to create stories based on the illumination of character rather than the contrivances of plot. Her works consider such universal concerns as family and love relationships and the everyday experiences of childhood and are noted for their distinctive wit, psychological sharpness, and perceptive characterizations. Mansfield is one of the few authors to attain prominence exclusively for short stories, and her works remain among the most widely read in world literature.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Enamored of England** Katherine Mansfield Beauchamp was born October 14, 1888, to Harold Beauchamp, a merchant and banker, and Annie Burnell (Dyer) Beauchamp in Wellington, New Zealand, and attended school in England in her early teens. She returned home after completing her education, but at nineteen she persuaded her parents to allow her to return to England.

Biographers believe that Mansfield either arrived in London pregnant as the result of a shipboard romance or that she became pregnant after her arrival as the result of an affair with a man she had known in New Zealand. She quickly married George Bowden, a young musician, and left him the next day for a German spa, where she miscarried, alone.

**Burgeoning Career** Mansfield returned to England following a period of recuperation, during which she wrote the short stories comprising her first collection, *In a German Pension* (1911). These stories focus on themes relating to sexual relationships, female subjugation, and childbearing.

Determined to pursue a literary career, between 1911 and 1915 Mansfield published short stories and book reviews in magazines. In 1912 she met editor and critic John Middleton Murry and was soon sharing the editorship of two magazines with him. The two began living together and married in 1918, after her first husband consented to a divorce.

**Bliss and The Garden Party** In 1915 Mansfield was reunited in London with her only brother, Leslie Heron Beauchamp, shortly before he was killed in a military training accident. His visit is believed to have reinforced Mansfield's resolve to incorporate material drawn from her New Zealand background into her fiction. The collections *Bliss, and Other Stories* (1920) and *The Garden Party, and Other Stories* (1922)—the last that Mansfield edited and oversaw in production—contain "Bliss," "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," "Je Ne Parle Pas Français," and "Miss Brill," which are considered among the finest short stories in the English language. The success of these volumes established Mansfield as a major talent comparable to such contemporaries as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

**Early End** At the end of 1918, Mansfield learned that what she had regarded as "rheumatism" was a longstanding sexually transmitted infection that damaged her fertility and had seriously affected her heart. She was further weakened by tuberculosis in the early 1920s. Nonetheless, she worked almost continuously, writing until the last few months of her life, when she undertook a faith cure in France. She died of a lung hemorrhage resulting from tuberculosis on January 9, 1923, at the age of thirty-four.

## Works in Literary Context

**Class Consciousness** Many of Mansfield's stories deal with the concerns of the upper class, as well as the chasm that exists between the upper and lower classes. This is shown most clearly in "The Garden Party," where the main character—whose most important responsibility is planning a party for her family's wealthy acquaintances—has a wrenching encounter with a lower-class neighbor whose husband has just died. The gap between the classes

is also evident in "A Cup of Tea," in which a wealthy woman brings a poor beggar girl back to her opulent home. The wealthy woman, who appears to have everything, becomes despondent when her husband comments on the poor girl's beauty, but fails to say the same for his wife. As illustrated in these stories, Mansfield acknowledges the vain preoccupations of the upper classes, but also shows that money alone does not provide happiness or fulfillment.

**Mansfield and Virginia Woolf** Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf had a significant influence on each other, although Mansfield objected to many of the Bloomsbury Group's ideas. Mansfield developed from Woolf a capacity to describe moments of intense perception, "that condition of standing outside of things, yet being more intensely in them." No other writers of the time could match Mansfield's or Woolf's capacity to convey the simultaneity of multiple and searching human perceptions.

**Mansfield, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov** Mansfield held deep literary debts to Russian writers Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Anton Chekhov. Her connection to Dostoyevsky focuses on his recognitions of consciousness and his extraordinary capacity to depict the agonies of the human soul. But, Mansfield felt that Chekhov knew as well as Dostoyevsky the agonies of consciousness, and he retained a capacity to respond to the outside world; he acknowledged a need to write and live simultaneously with one's recognitions. She began translating his letters, including one she said was vital to her view of her own art, in which Chekhov asserted that "what the writer does is not so much to *solve* the question but to *put* the question." The irresolvable suspension of human emotion between self and otherness adds to the recognition of irremediable class distinctions, a social concern in one of Mansfield's most deeply Chekhovian stories.

### Works in Critical Context

Mansfield's fiction has been increasingly respected throughout the years, and the quality of her thought and writing praised as further material has been posthumously published. Although reminiscences, particularly those of John Middleton Murry, the husband who survived her, have sometimes tended to sanctify her, healthy reactions against sanctity have questioned the viewpoints of Murry and others. The variety and brevity of her fiction, its accessibility as well as its length, have enabled Mansfield to reach an expanding audience throughout the century.

**The Garden Party and Other Stories** Jan Pilditch writes: "Katherine Mansfield published *The Garden Party and Other Stories* in 1922, the same year that [Anglo-American poet] T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, and [Irish writer] James Joyce published *Ulysses*. Mansfield's collection similarly represents the mature progress of her artistry. It contains some of her finest work, and illustrates the artistic usefulness of her New Zealand

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mansfield's famous contemporaries include:

**D. H. Lawrence** (1885–1930): Lawrence was an English writer and friend of Mansfield, who examined human sexuality in his novels. He was well-known for *Sons and Lovers* and *Women in Love*.

**Dorothy Lawrence** (1869–1964): Lawrence was an English reporter who posed as a man to become a soldier in World War I. She was discovered by the British and was made to promise not to write about her experiences for fear that other women would follow.

**Henri Matisse** (1869–1954): Matisse was a French sculptor, painter, and printmaker. He was a leading figure in modern art, famous for his fluid lines and use of vibrant color.

**Wilfred Owen** (1893–1918): Owen was a British soldier and leading poet of World War I. He was well-known for his graphic and realistic, rather than patriotic, poems about the war.

background.... Mansfield, no less than James Joyce, demonstrates a preoccupation with the growth of an artistic sensibility." And Don Kleine writes: "'The Garden Party' is generally, and with justice, regarded as one of the most nearly flawless short stories in the language."

Elizabeth Bowen writes: "We owe to [Mansfield] the prosperity of the 'free' story: she untrammelled it from conventions and, still more, gained for it a prestige till then unthought of. How much ground Katherine Mansfield broke for her successors may not be realized. Her imagination kindled unlikely matter; she was to alter for good and all our idea of what goes to make a story."

### Responses to Literature

1. Katherine Mansfield wrote about the difference between one's inner and outer worlds. When have you felt like what's going on inside you is not what other people see? Think about one specific instance. Was there a revealing detail that people should have noticed that indicated how you truly felt?
2. After her death, Mansfield's husband tried to present a specific view of her. Do you think that is understandable or dishonest?
3. Do you think short stories can reveal as much about a character as a whole novel can?
4. Mansfield's stories are fairly short, and their language is simple. Usually, we think of great literature as having complicated language and being difficult to read. Think about two musicians or artists you like,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Katherine Mansfield's short stories are driven by their characters rather than by an external plot. They are more about the interior life than specific events. Here are some other works that deal with this theme:

- The Cherry Orchard* (1904), a play by Anton Chekhov. Members of an aristocratic family return to their estate before it is auctioned off to pay their mortgage; caught in inertia, they are unable to save their home.
- On Golden Pond* (1981), a film directed by Mark Rydell. This movie follows the relationships between an elderly couple, their daughter, her fiancé, and his son as they reunite over the course of a summer.
- Runaway* (2004), short stories by Alice Munro. Three of these spare stories, reminiscent of Chekhov, focus on different stages of one woman's life; they all examine various facets of love and betrayal.
- To the Lighthouse* (1927), a novel by Virginia Woolf. This meditative story of a family's visit to the Scottish Isle of Skye is told by the interior thoughts of the characters and has minimal dialogue.
- Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), short stories by Raymond Carver. The minimalist tales in this collection focus on small epiphanies in ordinary people's lives that lead to a change in their outlook.

one with outwardly simpler work than the other. Write an essay comparing and contrasting their two approaches. Do you feel that one is stronger than the other? Be sure to use specific examples.

5. Many of Mansfield's stories use the past to establish a connection with the present and immediate. Read Galway Kinnell's poem "Pulling a Nail." Write an essay analyzing what the connection is between the past and present in this poem, using specific examples. Compare this poem to a work by Mansfield.

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## Kamala Markandaya

BORN: 1924, India

DIED: 2004, London

NATIONALITY: Indian

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)

*A Handful of Rice* (1966)

*Nowhere Man* (1972)

*Two Virgins* (1973)

### Overview

Kamala Markandaya is one of India's best-known novelists. The fact that her body of work, especially the novel *The Nowhere Man*, foreshadowed the explosion of published works by South Asian writers over the last several decades makes her novels required reading for anyone interested in Indian culture. Markandaya explores a

number of issues in her novels, including urbanization, poverty, sexuality, gender, interracial relationships, India's struggle to maintain its identity in an increasingly Westernized world, and colonialism's impact.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Indian and British Influences** Kamala Markandaya was born in Mysore, India, in 1924 to a privileged Brahmin family. Born Kamala Purnaiyas, and often known as Kamala Purnaiya Taylor, she adopted the surname Markandaya when her first novel was published. Little is known about her childhood, but as a young woman, she graduated with a degree in history from the University of Madras before working in the Indian army during World War II. She then established herself as a journalist and short-story writer, married a fellow journalist, Englishman Bertrand Taylor, and immigrated to Britain in 1948.

During Markandaya's youth, India was officially a colony of the British Empire. This led to a mix of both traditional Indian and contemporary English cultural influences, most notably the widespread use of the English language. A popular movement supporting the independence of India gained momentum throughout the 1920s and 1930s, largely due to the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi. India finally achieved its independence from Britain in 1948, the year Markandaya left the country.

**Publications** *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Markandaya's first published novel, was actually the third novel she wrote. The book became an international best seller and was translated into seventeen languages. A year later, the American Library Association named it a "Notable Book." It has remained a favorite on American and British university reading lists ever since. Markandaya never reveals the setting of the novel and never sets the action in a particular time or place, thus ensuring the story's timeless quality and universal appeal. This technique is especially effective given that the novel was published less than a decade after India won its independence from Britain.

*Some Inner Fury* (1956) is set during the British occupation, and her third novel, *A Silence of Desire* (1960), explores marriage, the effect modernity has on traditional Indian values, and what happens when the two merge. *Possession* (1963) continues in this vein, exploring the tensions between materialism and spiritualism in the context of an Anglo-Indian love relationship. Markandaya's fifth novel, *A Handful of Rice* (1966), revisits the topic of poverty, this time in an urban setting. *The Coffer Dams*, Markandaya's sixth novel, was published in 1969. At the time, the author could not know that her book would pave the way for future activist literature like Arundhati Roy's recent offerings. In her novel, Markan-

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Markandaya's famous contemporaries include:

**Ravi Shankar** (1920–): A sitar player who helped introduce Indian music to the rest of the world.

**Truman Capote** (1924–1984): A canonical American author known for his novels, plays, and nonfiction, including *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) and *In Cold Blood* (1965).

**Rosamunde Pilcher** (1924–): A British novelist who began her successful career in the romance genre but became known through her mainstream women's fiction.

**Dennis Vincent Brutus** (1924–): A South African poet who was exiled from his country for writing that reflected his activism against apartheid in the 1960s and 1970s.

daya explores the struggle Indian tribal nations face when an extensive dam project threatens to destroy their communities.

Many consider *The Nowhere Man* (1972) to be the author's greatest novel. Epic in scope, the story focuses on the cultural consequences of widespread postwar South Asian migration to Britain. Again, the book is prescient and foreshadows the work of contemporary authors Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, and Hanif Kureishi. Markandaya followed her masterpiece with *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), and *Pleasure City* (1982). Her last novel, published as *Shalimar* (1982) in the United States, was poorly received by critics, which led to her being dropped by her publisher. Although she lived for another twenty-two years, she never published another book.

She lived an intensely private life in England, traveling to India only occasionally. As with the beginning of her life, little is known about the author's later years. Markandaya died of kidney failure on May 16, 2004, in London, England. She is survived by her daughter, Kim Oliver.

## Works in Literary Context

**East vs. West** Whether Markandaya's novels are set in India or abroad, they consistently concern themselves with the struggle between traditional Indian values and Western modernity. This dilemma, including tensions between rationalism and faith, materialism and spirituality, and urban and rural ways of life, has become a part of India's identity over the last several decades. Markandaya embraces these opposites. Shiv Kumar of *Books Abroad* uses colorful imagery in his observation about her

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Markandaya deals with struggle, particularly in her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*. The protagonist, Rukmani, faces many hardships but manages to get through most of them via hope and faith. Here are some other works that emphasize courage and persistence in times of crisis.

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a novel by John Steinbeck. In this novel of the Great Depression, the Joad family leaves their farm and heads west.

*Midnight's Children* (1981), a novel by Salman Rushdie.

The young narrator of this novel is born on the same day that India gains independence, and thus his childhood mimics the country's own adjustment problems.

*Blindness* (1995), a novel by José Saramago. In an unnamed city, a plague of blindness descends inexplicably upon its citizens, who must then struggle to survive.

*Life of Pi* (2001), a novel by Yann Martel. A boy is shipwrecked for 227 days, and his only companion on the boat happens to be a tiger.

juxtaposition of the traditional against the contemporary, suggesting that her books portray “in symbolical characters and situations this thrust toward modernity, which often assumes in her work the guise of a malignant tumor infecting the vitals of a culture traditionally quietistic.”

**The Diaspora** Kamala Markandaya’s style is characterized by the use of metaphors and motifs, and short, clipped sentence structure. Her writing is generally empathetic, and she provides multiple perspectives on a range of subjects. In 1976, she wrote, “the Commonwealth writer abroad is lumbered with double vision. Double vision not in the sense of a flawed vision, but a vision that is slightly enlarged... and insists in perceiving two sides to every picture.” Her interest in issues related to the diaspora (the spread of people to other lands, usually initiated by political or economic difficulty) and to colonialism motivated her to explore ideas that, at the time, were fairly revolutionary. Indeed, many critics and scholars consider her the first diasporic Indian writer.

### Works in Critical Context

Markandaya is a realistic writer, a fact that has somewhat diminished her reputation, particularly since other Indian writers have chosen instead to embrace the more fantastical style of magic realism. Much of Markandaya’s value lies in the clarity of her prose, the inventiveness of her metaphors, and her gift for understanding the subtleties of human motives.

**Nectar in a Sieve** *Nectar in a Sieve* was highly praised for its accurate picture of Indian village life. Donald Barr of the *New York Times* wrote: “The basis of eloquence is knowledge, and *Nectar in a Sieve* has a wonderful, quiet authority over our sympathies because [Markandaya] is manifestly an authority on village life in India. Because of what she knows, she has been able to write a story without reticence or excess.” “It is a powerful book,” commented critic J. F. Muehl of *Saturday Review*, “but the power is in the content.... You read it because it answers so many real questions: What is the day-to-day life of the villager like? How does a village woman really think of herself? What goes through the minds of people who are starving?”

**Two Virgins** Reviewing *Two Virgins*, a *New Yorker* critic observed that Markandaya “writes in a forthright, almost breakneck style that could have been paced a little less relentlessly but could not be more precise or lucid. From the minutiae of the girls’s lives we learn a great deal about the fabric of life in India today. They are constantly choosing between Eastern and Western ways of looking at the world—in their school, at home, in their language, and in their attitudes toward their own ripening sexuality, of which they are both keenly aware.... Both their stories are fascinating and demonstrate that [Markandaya] writes as well about such universal feelings as lust, friendship, envy, and pride as she does about matters idiosyncratic to her country.”

### Responses to Literature

1. How might Markandaya’s history degree factor into her writing, particularly of *The Nowhere Man*? Arrange your ideas into an informal essay that centers on one or two examples from the text.
2. Read a novel by Markandaya. Find three passages in the text that you think exemplify the way in which Markandaya’s move to England affected her writing about her homeland of India. Write a paragraph explaining your interpretation of each passage.
3. Look up the term “diaspora” and discuss how Markandaya’s work fits into that category. Who are some other writers who belong to a “diaspora”? How are their works like Markandaya’s?

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## Christopher Marlowe

BORN: 1564, Canterbury, England

DIED: 1593, London, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Tamburlaine the Great* (1590)

*The Tragedie of Dido Queene of Carthage* (1594)

*The Tragical History of D. Faustus* (1604)

#### Overview

The achievement of Christopher Marlowe, poet and dramatist, was enormous—surpassed only by that of his exact contemporary William Shakespeare. Most dramatic poets of the sixteenth century followed where Marlowe had led, especially in their use of language and the blank-verse line. The prologue to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587–1588) proclaims its author's contempt for the stage verse of the period, in which the “jygging vaines of riming mother wits” presented the “conceits [which] clownage keepes in pay” instead the new play promised a barbaric foreign hero, the “Scythian Tamburlaine, Threatning the world with high astounding tearms.” English drama was never the same again.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**On Her Majesty's Secret Service** Marlowe lived his entire life during the Elizabethan era, the time period during which Queen Elizabeth I ruled England and Ireland. The era lasted from 1558 until her death in 1603, and was most notable for two great accomplishments: the rise of British sea superiority, demonstrated by both the British defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the extensive oceanic explorations of Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh; and the advancement of English

theatre to a popular and enduring art form, demonstrated by the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe.

Marlowe was born in February 1564, about two months before Shakespeare. His father was a prosperous middle-class merchant of Canterbury. Christopher received his early education at King's School in Canterbury, and at the age of seventeen went to Cambridge, where he received a bachelor of arts degree in 1584.

The terms of his scholarship allowed for a further three years' study if the holder intended to take holy orders, and Marlowe appears to have fulfilled this condition. But in 1587 the University at first refused to grant the appropriate degree of Master of Arts. The college records show that Marlowe was away from Cambridge for considerable periods during his second three years, and the university apparently had good reason to be suspicious of his whereabouts. Marlowe, however, was not without some influence by this time: Archbishop Whitgift, Lord Burghley, and Sir Christopher Hatton were among members of Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council who signed a letter explaining, “Whereas it was reported that Christopher Morley was determined to have gone beyond the seas to Reames and there to remaine...he had done her Majestie good service, & deserved to be rewarded for his faithfull dealinge.”

The reference to “Reames” makes everything clear. The Jesuit seminary at Rheims was the refuge of many

expatriate English Roman Catholics, banished from Queen Elizabeth's newly Protestant realm, who were thought to be scheming to overthrow the English monarch. It is likely that Marlowe was sent to Rheims on some sort of espionage mission as part of greater efforts to foil Elizabeth's Catholic foes.

**Wild Years in London** In 1587 Marlowe went from Cambridge to London. For the next six years he wrote plays and associated with other writers, among them the poet Thomas Watson and the dramatist Thomas Kyd. He soon became known for his wild, bohemian ways and his unorthodox thinking. In 1589, for example, he was imprisoned for a time in connection with the death of a certain William Bradley, who had been killed in a violent quarrel in which Marlowe played an important part. He was several times accused of being an "atheist" and a "blasphemer," most notably by his fellow playwright Thomas Kyd. These charges led to Marlowe's arrest in 1593, but he died before his case was decided.

Marlowe's career as a poet and dramatist spanned a mere six years. Between his graduation from Cambridge in 1587 and his death in 1593 he wrote only one major poem (*Hero and Leander*, unfinished at his death) and six or seven plays (one play, *Dido Queen of Carthage*, may have been written while he was still a student). Since the dating of several plays is uncertain, it is impossible to construct a reliable history of Marlowe's intellectual and artistic development.

**Dido, Queen of Carthage** For what was probably his first play, Marlowe took from the Roman poet Virgil the account of Dido's passion for Aeneas, the Trojan hero shipwrecked on the Carthaginian coast after the destruction of Troy, and added a subplot of the unrequited love of Anna, Dido's sister, for one of Dido's suitors, whose name—Iarbus—is mentioned only infrequently in Virgil's epic, the *Aeneid*. Virgil's hero is a man of destiny, ordained by the gods to sail to Italy and there establish the Roman race, the true descendants of the Trojans. The interlude with Dido is only a part of the divine plan. Aeneas must not allow himself to be detained in Carthage, even though his departure is a tragic catastrophe for the Queen. Virgil's gods are always in control of the action.

Marlowe introduces the gods at the beginning of his play, daringly presenting them as a bunch of rather shabby immortals subject to very human emotions: Venus is anxious for the welfare of her shipwrecked son, Aeneas; Juno is jealous of Venus and irritated by her husband's infidelities; and Jupiter is besotted with a homosexual passion for Ganymede. This is a grotesquely "domestic" comedy, which might seem to endanger the tragic stature of the play's heroine and the epic status of its hero, since both Dido and Aeneas are at the mercy of such deities. The character of Aeneas has provoked varying reactions in critics of the play (one sees him as "an Elizabethan adventurer"; another adopts the medieval view in which he is the betrayer of Troy; and for yet

another he is the unheroic "man-in-the-street" who has no desire for great actions). Dido, however, is unambiguously sympathetic. At first a majestic queen, she becomes almost inarticulate as she struggles with a passion that she does not understand. Her grief at Aeneas's departure brings back her eloquence, and then, preparing for death, she achieves the isolated dignity of a tragic heroine.

**Tamburlaine the Great** Based on the historical fourteenth-century Mongol conqueror Tamerlane, *Tamburlaine the Great*, a two-part play, was first printed in 1590 but was probably composed several years earlier. The famous prologue to the first part announces a new poetic and dramatic style: "From jiggling veins of rhyming mother wits,/ And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay/ We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,/ Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine/ Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms/ And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword./ View but his picture in this tragic glass,/ And then applaud his fortunes as you please." The play itself is a bold demonstration of Tamburlaine's rise to power and his single-minded, often inhumanly cruel exercise of that power.

**The Jew of Malta** Although written sometime between 1588 and 1592, *The Jew of Malta* was not printed until 1633, but it was frequently performed by The Admiral's Men in the years immediately following Marlowe's death. The recorded box-office receipts testify to its popularity. The chief figure, the phenomenally wealthy merchant-prince Barabas, is one of the most powerful figures of Elizabethan drama. Unlike Tamburlaine, who asserts his will openly and without guile, Barabas is shrewd, devious, and secretive. Yet Barabas is also a sympathetic character in that, at the beginning of the play, he is a man more sinned against than sinning: the victim of prejudice, his fault lies in his Jewishness—and the Knights of Malta are prepared to use religion as a cloak for theft when they take the Jews' property to pay the Turks. Barabas discloses their hypocrisy: "Preach me not out of my possessions." The prologue is delivered by a historical figure easily recognized by Marlowe's contemporary audiences: Niccolò Machiavelli, Italian political mastermind and author of *The Prince*.

**Doctor Faustus** *Doctor Faustus*, which is generally considered Marlowe's greatest work, was probably also his last. Its central figure, a scholar who feels he has exhausted all the conventional areas of human learning, attempts to gain the ultimate in knowledge and power by selling his soul to the devil.

In the last act of the play, he twice conjures up the spirit of Helen of Troy—the first time for the benefit of his scholar friends, who have requested to see "the admiralblest Lady that ever lived." The second time is for his own delight and comfort; he asks for Helen as his "paramour."

The second appearance of Helen calls forth from Faustus the most famous lines that Marlowe ever wrote:

Was this the face that Launcht a thousand ships,  
And burnt the toplesse Towers of Ilium? Sweet  
Hellen make me immortall with a kisse: Her lips  
sucke forth my soule, see where it flies.

The high point comes in the portrayal of the hero's final moments, as he awaits the powers of darkness who demand his soul.

Audience enthusiasm for Marlowe's works reflect important elements of Elizabethan culture. Though the Italian Renaissance had already passed, the same interest in classical subjects is found in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* and *Doctor Faustus*. At the same time, these classical and historical subjects were counterbalanced by moments of humor that might be described as "low" or inappropriate in tone. This reflects the wide-ranging audiences that were drawn to the theater during this time; England had steadily grown more prosperous under Elizabeth's rule, and even lower-class citizens frequented the theater for an evening's entertainment. Aside from historical and classical subjects, many of Marlowe's works reflected events and concerns of the Elizabethan era; *The Massacre at Paris*, for example, depicted the events of the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre (a wave of Catholic mob violence against Protestants in France resulting in tens of thousands of deaths), which mirrored the ongoing tensions between Catholics and Protestants within England.

**A Violent Death** The circumstances of Marlowe's death first came to light in the twentieth century with the discovery of the original coroner's report in the Public Record Office in London. The report tells of a meeting at the house of Mrs. Eleanor Bull in Deptford—not a tavern, but a house where meetings could be held and food supplied. On May 30, 1593 Marlowe spent the whole day there, talking and walking in the garden with three "gentlemen." In the evening there was a quarrel, ostensibly about who should pay the bill, "le recknyng"; in the ensuing scuffle Marlowe is said to have drawn his dagger and wounded one of his companions. The man, Ingram Frizer, snatched the weapon and "in defence of his life, with the dagger aforesaid...gave the said Christopher then and there a mortal wound over his right eye of the depth of two inches and of the width of one inch; of which mortal wound the aforesaid Christopher Morley then and there instantly died."

Despite the unusual wealth of detail surrounding this fatal episode, there has been much speculation about the affair. It has been suggested, for example, that the deed was politically motivated and that Frizer (who was subsequently judged to have acted in self-defense) was simply acting as an agent for a more prominent person.

## Works in Literary Context

In many ways, Marlowe's plays typify attitudes in Renaissance England. The intellectual and aesthetic rebirth known as the Renaissance began in Italy during the four-

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Marlowe's famous contemporaries include:

**William Shakespeare** (1564–1616): English poet and playwright widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's best dramatist. His plays have been translated into every major language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

**Ben Jonson** (1572–1637): An English Renaissance poet, dramatist and actor best known today for his satirical plays and poetry.

**Elizabeth I** (1533–1603): The Queen of England and Ireland from 1558 to her death, and daughter of Henry VIII. Her reign saw the ascendancy of English drama and the beginnings of English naval power in the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the exploits of English "Sea Dogs" like Francis Drake.

**Sir Francis Drake** (1540–1596): English privateer, explorer, slave trader, adventurer. Second in command of the English fleet that faced the Spanish Armada, Drake became the scourge of the Spaniards with his raids on treasure ships returning from the New World.

**Philip II** (1527–1598): King of Spain and Portugal, ruler of the Spanish colonial empire, after whom the Philippine Islands are named. His reign saw the beginning of the Eighty Years' War with the Netherlands, and also the defeat of the Armada, which brought a permanent end to his ambitions to conquer Protestant England.

teenth century and, in the next two centuries, spread new ideas throughout Europe. Three aspects of Renaissance culture—Humanism, Individualism, and the New Science—figure as prominent themes in Marlowe's play. Rejecting medieval social and religious attitudes, Renaissance Humanists privileged individual over collective values. Humanism encouraged people to realize their happiness and potential in this, the material world, rather than focusing solely on eternal happiness in the afterlife.

**Tragedy** Although a number of English dramatists before Christopher Marlowe had achieved some notable successes in the field of comedy, none had produced a first-rate tragedy. It was Marlowe who made the first significant advances in tragedy. In each of his major plays he focuses on a single character that dominates the action by virtue of his extraordinary strength of will. Marlowe's thundering blank verse, although for the most part lacking the subtlety of Shakespeare's mature poetry, proved a remarkably effective medium for this kind of drama.

**Blank Verse** Critics tend to agree that Marlowe's innovation in verse was the first and most influential

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Christopher Marlowe's version of the Faust story focuses on the dire consequences of his character's choices. The following are other works with a similar focus on action and consequence.

*Macbeth* (1603–06) by William Shakespeare. In plotting to kill their king, Macbeth and his wife metaphorically "sell their souls" in exchange for political power. Both *Doctor Faustus* and this play successfully explore the psychology of transgression, guilt, and punishment.

*Crime and Punishment* (1866), a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In this classic of Russian literature, a student named Raskolnikov murders a pawn broker and is haunted by paranoia even as he attempts to improve society through his actions.

*It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), a film by Frank Capra. In this holiday favorite, a desperate and down-on-his-luck man named George Bailey finds out what the world would have been like if he had never lived.

*A Separate Peace* (1959), a novel by John Knowles. In this coming-of-age tale, the lives of two boys—close friends with radically different personalities—are dramatically changed by a tragic accident caused by one of them.

predecessor to the stylistic achievements of the era. It was *Tamburlaine the Great* that made this powerful verse style famous. Marlowe stresses in the prologue to Part I that it is his intention to depart from the "jigging veins of rhyming mother wits," or unsophisticated rhymes like those of a mother giving silly advice in the form of a jig, of his predecessors. Instead, Marlowe wanted to create a work of high philosophical ambitions and powerful, "astounding" verse.

The poetic tool Marlowe uses for his "mighty line" is blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which is a meter with five beats of two-syllable units called iambs. This style, adapted from Greek and Latin heroic verse, was developed in Italy before Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, introduced it in England. Marlowe was perhaps the chief innovator to instill blank verse with emotional force and rhythmic eloquence, and he was also influential in skillfully suiting his characters' temperaments to the nature of their lines.

### Works in Critical Context

Within three or four years of his death, Marlowe's career was being cited by contemporary moralists as a classic illustration of the workings of divine retribution against a blasphemous atheist. In 1597, for example, Thomas Beard recognized in it "a manifest signe of Gods judgement...in that hee compelled his owne hand which had

written those blasphemies to be the instrument to punish him, and that in his braine, which had devised the same." But he was also recognized as a remarkable dramatic genius who, if he had lived longer, was on track to have rivaled the likes of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

Contemporary poet Michael Drayton observed in him "those brave translunary things That the first poets had." This early appreciation has extended over the years, so that now most critics—sharing the benefits of hindsight—would agree with A. C. Swinburne that Marlowe was "the father of English tragedy and the creator of English blank verse." According to Havelock Ellis, "Marlowe's place is at the heart of English poetry"; and T. S. Eliot even predicted "the direction in which Marlowe's verse might have moved...[which was toward]...intense and serious and indubitably great poetry."

Although Shakespeare was able to bring his art to an ever higher level, most dramatic poets of the sixteenth century followed where Marlowe had led, especially in their use of language and the blank-verse line. English drama was never the same.

**Doctor Faustus** Although *Doctor Faustus* was a staple production for The Admiral's Men for several years after its creation, it was also a divisive work that some sources suggest was not that popular with Elizabethan audiences. It prompted Puritan author William Prynne, in his 1632 attack on Elizabethan theater known as *Histriomastix*, to proclaim that the production was sinful enough to cause actual demons to materialize onstage. The play, like many of Marlowe's works, was virtually forgotten through the eighteenth century, though it was rediscovered and appreciated by later scholars. William Hazlitt, in a lecture from around 1820, states that the play, "although an unequal and imperfect performance, is [Marlowe's] greatest work. Faustus himself is a rude sketch, but it is a gigantic one." In 1908, poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne praised the play, stating that "in dramatic power and positive impression of natural effect it is...certainly the masterpiece of Marlowe." Writing in 1971, scholar Gâmini Salgado confirmed the lasting impact of the work, stating that "the action and spectacle have retained undiminished their capacity to hold an audience enthralled."

### Responses to Literature

1. How are the moral themes of the plays *Dr. Faustus* and *Tamburlaine the Great* similar? How do they differ? What does *Dr. Faustus* imply about one human's relationship to the universe? How does this differ from the implications of *Tamburlaine the Great*? How do the plays differ in style and form? Which one sheds more light on today's society, and which one would you rather see performed today? Explain your choices.

2. In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the pursuit of knowledge fails to produce happiness. Do you believe that too much knowledge brings unhappiness? Are there some things people were not meant to know?
3. Most readers of Marlowe's play feel that Doctor Faustus wastes a wonderful opportunity. If you had Faustus's power, what would you do?
4. Often news reporters and pundits compare certain political and entertainment figures to Dr. Faustus, saying that they made a "deal with the devil" to attain their success. Write an informal paper in which you examine contemporary figures in light of the dramatic character Dr. Faustus.

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## Gabriel García Márquez

BORN: 1928, Aracataca, Colombia

NATIONALITY: Colombian

GENRE: Novels, short stories, nonfiction

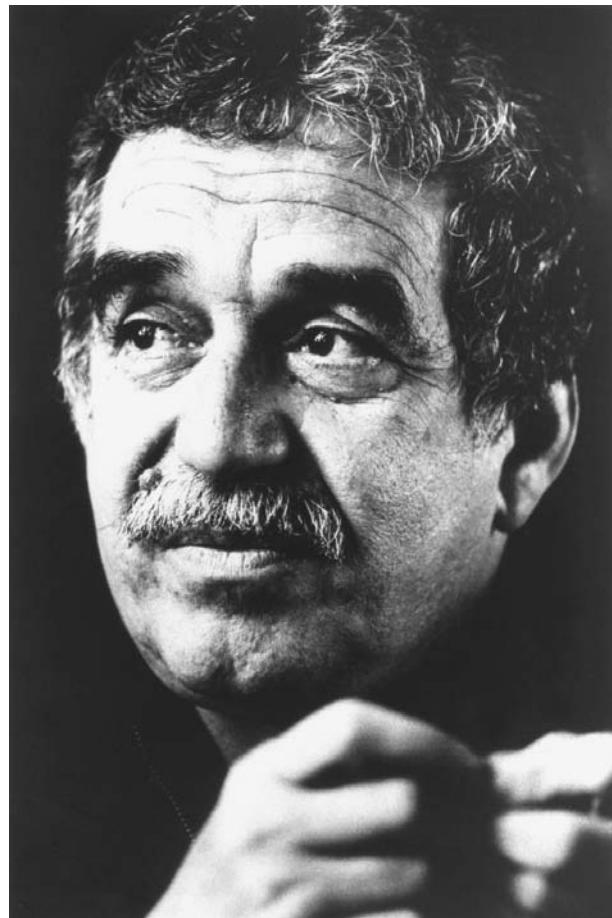
MAJOR WORKS:

*No One Writes to the Colonel and Other Stories* (1961)

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)

*The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975)

*Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985)



Gabriel García Márquez Marquez, Gabriel Garcia, 1982, photograph. AP Images.

#### Overview

Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez shares with many Nobel laureates in literature a concern for the common man, an ongoing faith in the human spirit, and a commitment to telling stories that are accessible to a broad audience. Many of García Márquez's works are considered examples of "magical realism," a literary style that typically has a strong narrative drive in which the recognizably realistic mingles with the unexpected and inexplicable. García Márquez is credited with helping reinvoke the modern novel genre.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Life in a Small Village Culture** García Márquez was born on March 7, 1928, in the northern Caribbean coastal region of Colombia in the town of Aracataca. He was the son of telegrapher Gabriel Eligio García and Luisa Santiaga Márquez de García (a pair whose star-crossed courtship García Márquez would later fictionalize in *Love in the Time of Cholera*). García

Márquez lived with his maternal grandparents for eight years after his father left home to seek better employment. The vast majority of the population in this impoverished and strongly Afro-Colombian region of the country was illiterate and, as a result, had a strong and vibrant oral culture. National newspapers did not yet circulate in this region, and much of the news from the outside world came to Aracataca and other small towns by means of *vallenatos*, popular music that told tales garnished with real people and events. Not surprisingly, the storytelling of his grandmother, the long decline of Aracataca, and the myths and superstitions of the townspeople all played major roles in shaping García Márquez's imagination and literary style. García Márquez has acknowledged that the fictional town of Macondo, the focal point of his masterwork *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was based on Aracataca.

**Journalism and Literary Circle amidst Political Violence** Life changed radically for many citizens of Colombia in April 1948 when political violence broke out in the streets of Bogotá after the assassination of the presidential candidate of the Liberal Party, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán. García Márquez was attending law school in Bogotá at the time. After the university closed and his boardinghouse was burned down, García Márquez moved to a more peaceful setting, the coastal city of Cartagena, where he took a job as a journalist. In 1950, he moved to Barranquilla and continued newspaper work. It was in Barranquilla that he befriended other young writers and became familiar with the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, both of whom would influence his writing. Partisan violence spread across the nation from 1948 to 1956, and Colombia experienced a civil war identified as La Violencia, which led to more than three hundred thousand deaths.

**Political Dissent** García Márquez returned to Bogotá in 1954, serving as a film critic and reporter for *El espectador*, and the next year his novella *Leaf Storm (La hojarasca)* was published. During this period he also gained political notoriety for his account in *El espectador* of the experiences of Luis Alejandro Velasco, a sailor who survived the shipwreck of a Colombian naval vessel in the Caribbean. This series of reports, later published as *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor (Relato de un naufrago,* 1970), exposed the existence of contraband cargo onboard the ship and suggested the general incompetence of the nation's navy.

Seeking to avoid governmental retribution, García Márquez traveled throughout Europe during 1955, working as a foreign correspondent for his newspaper. In 1956, however, the military government of Colombia headed by Gustavo Rojas Pinilla shut down the periodical and, fearing reprisal if he should return, García Márquez settled in Paris. During this time, many of his peers in Colombia were writing bloody accounts of La Violencia in the 1950s, but García Márquez's approach was differ-

ent: he wrote stories that subtly alluded to political violence, with political conflict only a part of the general plot. In this way, García Márquez emphasized the human drama in a more universal way than had been the case in Colombian fiction of his contemporaries.

**Anti-U.S., Pro-Cuba Writings** During the late 1950s and early 1960s, García Márquez wrote journalistic pieces criticizing the U.S. government and celebrating the Cuban Revolution. Like many Latin American intellectuals of this period, García Márquez viewed the Cuban Revolution as a model for the Latin American nations establishing economic and cultural independence from the United States, which had since the turn of the century taken an aggressive role in Latin American politics. During the Cuban Revolution of 1958, Fidel Castro led a successful Communist insurgency against the U.S.-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista. Because this occurred during the height of Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, the United States government was greatly disturbed by the presence of a Communist nation just ninety miles from the American border. The United States attempted to facilitate the overthrow of the new Communist regime in 1961 by giving CIA backing to a botched, embarrassing invasion attempt known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion. One year later, the Soviet Union installed nuclear weapons on Cuba, sparking the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the most perilous superpower showdowns of the Cold War. The crisis was resolved without violence, but relations between the United States and Cuba have been frosty ever since.

As a result of his pro-Cuba writings and a visit to Cuba (which led to a lifelong friendship with Fidel Castro), García Márquez has had difficulty most of his adult life in acquiring visas to visit the United States; for many years, he was on a State Department blacklist of leftist intellectuals.

**A "Boom" in Latin American Literature** The 1960s were the years of the internationally recognized "Boom" of the Latin American novel. The Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Argentine Julio Cortázar, and García Márquez—these Latin American writers "who have given to its literature a maturity and dignity it never had before," to quote John Sturrock in the *New York Times Book Review*.

When *One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien años de soledad)* was published in 1967 by the Argentine publishing house Sudamericana, its impact was swift and broad. Critics from Argentina to Spain immediately heralded it as one of the major novels to have been published in recent years. Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, himself a Nobel laureate, was quoted in *Time* as calling the book "the greatest revelation in the Spanish language since the *Don Quixote* of Cervantes. With the novel's publication, the Boom was at its height in Latin America and gaining an unprecedented international respect.

**International Celebrity After One Hundred Years of Solitude** Following the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and its international success, García Márquez assumed the lifestyle of an international celebrity, with homes on several continents. When García Márquez received the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, he returned to Colombia a national hero, and the entire country celebrated. Because of his popularity after receiving the Nobel Prize, he was named an ambassador for the Colombian government and political groups within Colombia. Though García Márquez was most vocal about his progressive agenda in the 1970s (his 1975 novel *The Autumn of the Patriarch* was, for example, a pointed critique of Latin American dictatorships), he was a more moderate political voice for the downtrodden in the 1980s and 1990s. He promoted dialogue among such diverse political forces as the United States, Cuba, and France.

After being treated for lymphatic cancer in 1999, García Márquez continued writing and published *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* in 2004.

### Works in Literary Context

Because of his training as a journalist, García Márquez smoothly incorporates social and historical elements into his fiction, a skill that allows him to promote the central themes of his work: violence, solitude, and mankind's need for love and companionship.

**Journalistic Influence** Although known as a novelist, García Márquez began his writing career as a reporter and still considers himself to be one. The *Reference Guide to World Literature* asserts that the evolution of García Márquez's individual style is based on his experience as a correspondent. In addition, this same experience has led Regina Janes and other critics to compare the Colombian to Ernest Hemingway, a famous American journalist-turned-novelist. Critics have also pointed out the similarities between García Márquez and William Faulkner, the American novelist famous for his books about the Deep South.

**Magical Realism** The term "magical realism" has become somewhat controversial in literary criticism because it has been perhaps too liberally applied. In a basic sense, magical realism in fiction is marked by realistic settings and everyday scenes in which sometimes the illogical, impossible, or miraculous occurs. However, García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is considered quintessentially magical realist. The novel is on the one hand a perfectly realistic fictional chronicle of Macondo—a microcosm of Colombia and, by extension, of South America and the world—from its harmonious beginnings under founder José Arcadio Buendía to its increasingly chaotic decline through six generations of descendants. But in addition to reflecting the political, social, and economic ills of South America, the novel is filled with fantastic events, including a baby born with a

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

García Márquez's famous contemporaries include:

- Jorge Luis Borges** (1899–1986): Argentine short story writer and fellow magical realist, known for his intricate and interwoven plotlines.
- Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980): French writer and existentialist philosopher.
- Frida Kahlo** (1907–1954): Mexican surrealistic painter, who was also involved in politics with her husband, muralist Diego Rivera.
- Fidel Castro** (1926–): Controversial Latin American revolutionary and president of Cuba.
- Isabel Allende** (1942–): Chilean writer and magical realist most known for her novel *The House of the Spirits*.

pig tail and flocks of yellow butterflies that follow certain characters. The genre continues to be popular in Latin American literature, as it allows writers to blend the hard political and economic realities of their home regions with the folklore of their cultures and the often wild, grand natural landscape of their countries.

### Works in Critical Context

*Tribune Books* contributor Harry Mark Petrakis described García Márquez as "a magician of vision and language who does astonishing things with time and reality. He blends legend and history in ways that make the legends seem truer than truth. His scenes and characters are humorous, tragic, mysterious and beset by ironies and fantasies. In his fictional world, anything is possible and everything is believable." In addition, the critic asserted: "Mystical and magical, fully aware of the transiency of life, his stories fashion realms inhabited by ghosts and restless souls who return to those left behind through fantasies and dreams. The stories explore, with a deceptive simplicity, the miracles and mysteries of life."

**One Hundred Years of Solitude** *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is García Márquez's best-known contribution to the awakening of interest in Latin American literature. According to an *Antioch Review* critic, the popularity and acclaim for *One Hundred Years of Solitude* signaled that "Latin American literature will change from being the exotic interest of a few to essential reading and that Latin America itself will be looked on less as a crazy subculture and more as a fruitful, alternative way of life." Similarly enthusiastic was William Kennedy, who wrote in the *National Observer* that "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race."

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many writers have experimented with magical realism, a blend of reality and fantasy in a literary text. The result is insight—often clever, sometimes comical—into the nature of reality itself. Other works of magical realism include:

*The Metamorphosis* (1915), by Franz Kafka. In this famous work of magical realism, the main character awakens to find himself transformed into a giant insect.

*The House of the Spirits* (1982), by Isabel Allende. In this novel by the Chilean writer, the main character inhabits a house full of ghosts while she tries to understand her complex family tree.

*Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), by Thomas King. A novel by a Cherokee writer featuring a mythical reality inhabited by one of a quintessential magical realist figures, the trickster Coyote.

*Ceremony* (1977), by Leslie Marmon Silko. This highly acclaimed novel tells the story of a Native American veteran's return to his New Mexico reservation after World War II.

*Life of Pi* (2001), by Yann Martel. In this novel, a young boy named Pi is shipwrecked and must survive on a raft somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Pi's only companion is a tiger named Richard Parker.

***The Autumn of the Patriarch*** In *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*, 1975), García Márquez uses a more openly political tone in exploring the isolation of a political tyrant. "In this fabulous, dreamlike account of the reign of a nameless dictator of a fantastic Caribbean realm, solitude is linked with the possession of absolute power," described Ronald De Feo in the *National Review*. Some critics, however, found both the theme and technique of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* lacking. *Newsweek*'s Walter Clemons considered the novel somewhat disappointing: "After the narrative vivacity and intricate characterization of the earlier book [*The Autumn of the Patriarch*] seems both oversumptuous and underpopulated. It is—deadliest of compliments—an extended piece of magnificent writing."

***Love in the Time of Cholera*** Another blending of fable and fact, based in part on García Márquez's recollections of his parents' marriage, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (*El amor en los tiempos del colera*, 1985) "is an amazing celebration of the many kinds of love between men and women," according to Elaine Feinstein of the *London Times*. In relating both the story of Fermina Daza's marriage and her later courtship, this "is a novel about commitment and fidelity under circumstances which seem to render such virtues absurd," recounted

*Times Literary Supplement* contributor S.M.J. Minta. Although the basic plot is fairly simple, some critics have accused García Márquez of over-embellishing his story. *Chicago Tribune Books* contributor Michael Dorris remarked that "it takes a while to realize this core [plot], for every aspect of the book is attenuated, exaggerated, overstated." Still, the book is seen as García Márquez's being true to himself. As *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani described it, *Love in the Time of Cholera* "has revealed how the extraordinary is contained in the ordinary, how a couple of forgotten, even commonplace lives can encompass the heights and depths of grand and eternal passion."

## Responses to Literature

1. The term "magic realism" was coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925. For Roh, it was synonymous with post-expressionist painting (1920–1925) because it revealed the mysterious elements hidden in everyday reality. García Márquez has claimed more than once that he is merely a "realist" who describes the everyday reality of his nation and of Latin America. Considering the fact that García Márquez has always been more interested in writers who invent reality (Kafka, Faulkner) rather than those who merely describe it, why do you think García Márquez would make such a claim about his own work? Support your answer with examples and elements present throughout García Márquez's body of work.
2. Many of García Márquez's works span long periods of time. Why do you think he chooses to portray his characters in terms of decades instead of days or weeks? Compare his use of time as a literary device to that of other writers and conclude what method is most effective. Provide specific examples to support your argument.
3. Besides Faulkner, name other writers who set their works so steadfastly in one location. Does this literary technique seem to limit or expand the scope of those works? Provide specific examples to support your argument.

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## Ngaio Marsh

BORN: 1899, Christchurch, New Zealand

DIED: 1982, Christchurch, New Zealand

NATIONALITY: British, New Zealander

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Man Lay Dead* (1934)

*Overture to Death* (1939)

*Opening Night* (1951)

*Scales of Justice* (1955)

*Light Thickens* (1982)

### Overview

During what is usually referred to as the Golden Age of the detective story, Ngaio Marsh was one of a small group of British mystery writers who set standards of the detective novel that broadened the audience for the genre. In a career that spanned almost half a century, her popularity grew steadily, and her works became as sought after in the United States as they were in England and her native New Zealand.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Developing Early Passions for Theater** Ngaio Marsh was born in Christchurch on April 23, 1899, to Henry Edmund and Rose Elizabeth Seager Marsh. She first studied painting, entering art school when she was fifteen, but her great love was always the theater. Her parents had been amateur actors, and she considered the appearances of Allan Wilkie's Shakespearean troupe in Christchurch "one of the great events of [her] student days."

**Acting Career, International Travel, and a Move to London** Marsh had already begun to write and submitted a Regency play, *The Medallion*, to Wilkie. Though he rejected the play, he returned it in person and invited her to join his company. She toured with Wilkie for two years, meanwhile writing verse, articles, and short



Ngaio Marsh Marsh, Ngaio, photograph. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

stories for the *Christchurch Sun*. Upon her return to Christchurch, Marsh resumed painting for a brief period before leaving once again to tour with a local acting company formed by Rosemary Rees. When that company failed, she returned home and was active as actress, producer, and director in a group staging charity shows. Here, she became friendly with a British family of the peerage and accepted an invitation to visit them when they returned to England. She turned them into fictional characters in several of her books, calling them the "Lampreys." She created, as her series detective, Roderick Alleyn, named after Edward Alleyn, the great Elizabethan tragedian and founder of Dulwich College, the school her father had attended before immigrating to New Zealand. Marsh lived in England from 1928 to 1933, doing interior decorating and operating a gift shop. She frequented the London theater at every opportunity.

**Early Mystery Inclinations** Mysteries had always been read in the Marsh household in New Zealand. In her 1965 autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, Marsh mentions reading such authors as Baroness Orczy, Guy Boothby, and William J. Locke, and recalls her rainy-day find of *Strand* magazines and discovering Sherlock Holmes. In 1931, on another rainy occasion, she began

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Marsh's famous contemporaries include:

**Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956): German playwright, stage director, and poet, he is credited, among many things, with creating the idea of epic theater.

**Frederic Dannay** (1905–1982): American writer, editor, and anthologist who—along with his cousin Manfred Bennington Lee—created mystery fiction under the name Ellery Queen.

**Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): Famous expatriate writer, his name is synonymous with the Great American Novel.

**Frank Sargeson** (1903–1982): Noted New Zealand short story writer.

**Joseph Stalin** (1878–1953): General secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, he was subsequently the de facto dictator responsible for what is today known as Stalinism.

writing her first mystery novel. This first book, *A Man Lay Dead*, was not published until 1934, by which time she had returned to New Zealand because her mother was ill.

**Illness** Following her mother's death after what Marsh described as "an illness as cruelly and as excruciatingly protracted as if it had been designed by Torquemada," she remained in New Zealand to care for her father. She also wrote and painted. But she became very ill herself, and "a long-standing disability" landed her in the hospital for three months for a series of operations. Just as she used painting and the theater in her books, she made use of this experience and collaborated with her physician, Dr. Henry Jellett, on *The Nursing Home Murder* (1935).

**Work with the Red Cross in World War II** Marsh returned to England in 1937, did some touring of Europe, and then returned to New Zealand in 1938—where she stayed during World War II, driving a Red Cross ambulance. World War II took its place in history as the most costly of all human conflicts; in it 70 million people, mostly civilians, lost their lives and the overall financial cost of the war is estimated to be, based on 1944 standards, \$1 trillion. Marsh used her experiences serving with the Red Cross to write two wartime mysteries—*Colour Scheme* (1943) and *Died in the Wool* (1945). She also became increasingly serious about her theater work, producing and directing productions at Canterbury College where she reintroduced Shakespearean productions to New Zealand after a twenty-year absence. After World War II she returned to England to

work with the British Commonwealth Theatre Company, a group she eventually brought on tour to Australia and New Zealand.

### Earning Distinction as a Writer of Crime Shorts

Marsh's first published short story, "I Can Find My Way Out," appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* in August of 1946. She had entered the story in the magazine's first short-story contest, which attracted a prestigious list of entrants. Her entry led to correspondence with its editor, Frederic Dannay, during the course of which she wrote, "I know of no Australasian writer of crime shorts of any distinction." In announcing she had won third prize in the contest, and introducing her story with a brief history of mystery fiction in Australia and New Zealand, Dannay pointed out that this was no longer true.

**Life as Dame Ngaio Marsh** In 1966 Marsh was appointed a dame of the British Empire, largely as a result of her work in the theater. For the rest of her life, Dame Ngaio Marsh divided her time between the theater and mystery writing. She also split her time between England and New Zealand, spending the last years before her death on February 18, 1982, in her native city. In *Black Beech and Honeydew*, Marsh has stated that in New Zealand she was seldom interviewed by the media regarding her mystery writing but more often about her work in the theater. Therefore, she was astonished to find a great deal of interest in her mysteries among serious readers in Great Britain, writing that "it was pleasant to find detective fiction being discussed as a tolerable form of reading by people whose opinion one valued."

### Works in Literary Context

**Influences of Theater and Art** Marsh's knowledge of the theater, London's society and art worlds, and the rugged terrain of New Zealand informed her thirty-two novels and a handful of short stories. She classified herself with the mystery writers who create believable characters and use novelistic values, rather than those whose main interest is the puzzle. Among the writers who influenced Marsh are Baroness Orczy, Guy Boothby, William J. Locke, and Arthur Conan Doyle. *Final Curtain* presents Marsh's love of the theater. *Killer Dolphin* (1966) and *Light Thickens* (1982), among others, show her love for and talent with theater as a writer with a drama background, and show her typical thinking in theatrical terms.

In several Marsh novels painting is equally important. *Artists in Crime* (1938) and *Final Curtain* (1947) both feature a painter named Agatha Troy who plays a part in each story. These and other novels contain many descriptions in which color is used vividly, suggesting a painter's eye.

**Using and Expanding Mystery Genre Conventions** While working within the conventions of the classic detective puzzle, Marsh adapted them to her own interests and style. Though her work inevitably bore some resemblances to Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery

Allingham, who had preceded her, it was sufficiently original that discerning readers found the typical Marsh experience to be unique.

For example, Marsh brings her clever variations on the theme of suspect likelihood: It is seldom possible to tell in one of her mysteries whether the murderer will be the most obvious suspect or the least likely—or someone in between. In her early works, the traditional reenactment of the crime came to be expected, as Alleyn used it to discover the murderer. Later, she had Alleyn use more conventional, though never ordinary or dull, means of detection to either trap or uncover the guilty party.

**Lessons from Theater Prove Useful in Plot Designs** As a playwright Marsh was aware of the dangers of anticlimax (of disappointment rather than satisfaction following the peak of excitement), and her summaries of Alleyn's reasoning tended to be shorter than the explanations of other mystery writers. Motive usually would prove not to be critical to Marsh's solution, since most of her suspects had equally good reasons; often they were being blackmailed. Despite her stated interest in character portrayal, she was also interested in opportunity, the "how" and "when" of the murder, rather than the "why." Physical clues, rather than verbal, are more likely to be the key to the solution in her books.

**Breaking Tradition Yields Police Procedural Subgenre** Another long-standing tradition with which Marsh gradually broke was that of the amateur detective. Even when the policeman, like Alleyn, was a professional, he often relied on a friend who had no official standing. With Marsh it was the flighty journalist Nigel Bathgate, who appeared in eight of the early books, providing comic relief and occasionally requiring Alleyn to rescue him. Alleyn was never a "lone wolf" and cannot be considered without the Scotland Yarders who appear in most Marsh books, those he refers to as "the usual people," when he encounters a murder and calls for assistance. Through Alleyn and his compatriots, Marsh provided an important transition to the works of Maurice Procter, John Creasey, Ed McBain, Elizabeth Linington, and others who would make the police procedural the most important new subgenre of the mystery in the 1950s.

### Works in Critical Context

Marsh's works have received a wide range of criticism. Her early works, for example, were criticized for the number and length of the interviews conducted by the police within each story. With the passing years, however, Marsh shortened the question-and-answer sessions. Later, she even shunned that device as she found means to add more action to the middle portions of her books.

Nevertheless, representative of Marsh's complete body of work and the subsequent criticism are such long-standing works as *Overture to Death* (1939).

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Readers have long enjoyed works in which they are called upon to figure out the true murderer from among a group of suspects, thanks to clues carefully placed by the author along the way. Below are some other examples of murder mysteries similar to those Marsh created:

*The Mousetrap* (1952), a play by Agatha Christie. This murder mystery is the longest-running play in theatrical history by the best-selling mystery writer of all time.

*A Is for Alibi* (1982), a novel by Sue Grafton. The first of the Kinsey Millhone Alphabet Mysteries, this whodunit follows in the footsteps of Dashiell Hammett's hard-boiled detective Sam Spade.

*The Club Dumas* (1993), a novel by Arturo Perez-Reverte. In this detective mystery, the internationally best-selling author features Lucas Corso, a man hired by wealthy merchants to find two copies of a rare and dangerous antique book.

*Rules of Prey* (1989), a novel by John Sandford. This first in a series introduces readers to Lucas Davenport, an unconventional detective called in to solve a bewildering string of serial murders in Minneapolis.

**Overture to Death** The book is set in the Dorset countryside, and the first quarter of the book has to do with village rivalries and jealousies that have arisen during preparations for an amateur theatrical performance to raise funds for the local parish house. Though frequently referred to as Marsh's best book, *Overture to Death* did not escape the critical wrath of the famous Edmund Wilson in his equally famous essay, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" Wilson read the book because critic Bernard DeVoto had referred to Marsh's "excellent prose." Wilson's judgment: "It would be impossible I should think, for anyone with the faintest feeling for words, to describe the unappetizing sawdust which Miss Marsh has poured into her pages as 'excellent prose' or as prose at all except in the sense that distinguishes prose from verse."

Wilson's judgment, however, was decidedly a minority opinion. Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor praised its excellent detection and depiction of life in a small village. Robert E. Briney called it "a superior example of the literate whodunit." Howard Haycraft and Ellery Queen included it on their definitive list of best mysteries.

### Responses to Literature

1. Read any of Marsh's novels. How does she depict her male protagonists and the other men in the

novel? What are the female views of the males in the book? What are the male views of females in the book? Given the gender treatments, which gender would you say would be more likely to read the book? Why?

2. How does Marsh incorporate her love of theater into her novels? Provide examples from one of her works, such as *Final Curtain* or *Light Thickens*.
3. Marsh was a native New Zealander. How does she depict New Zealand in her works? Does the setting contribute to the story? Does the use of New Zealand as a setting contribute to any of Marsh's themes? How much more does a reader know about New Zealand after reading a Marsh work?
4. Marsh's novels, like many murder mysteries, are primarily concerned with who committed the crime and how they accomplished the task. One popular exercise among mystery writers is the "locked-door" mystery, in which a person is somehow killed while alone inside a locked room. Try to think up a scenario in which a "locked-door" setting could be accomplished. Write your scenario as a short mystery story.

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## Yann Martel

BORN: 1963, Salamanca, Spain

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamattios* (1993)

*Self* (1996)

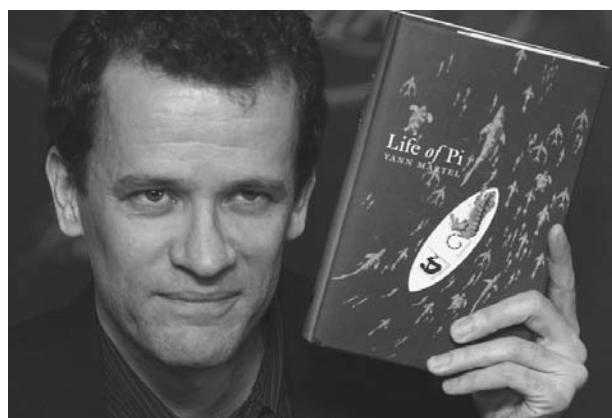
*Life of Pi* (2001)

### Overview

Yann Martel, a Canadian writer, has received international acclaim for work that celebrates the power of the imagination in the face of adversity, blending philosophical inquiry with metafiction. All of his published works have won literary prizes; his second novel, *Life of Pi* (2001), received the 2002 Booker Prize, and became an international best seller.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**An International Childhood** Yann Martel was born on June 25, 1963, in Salamanca, Spain, the child of two civil servants of French Canadian descent. His father, Émile Martel, was both a diplomat and a noted poet. Martel's childhood was spent in numerous parts of the world, including Alaska, Costa Rica, France, India, Mexico, and Turkey. He attended secondary schools and Trent University in Ontario, and Concordia University in Quebec, from which he received a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy in 1985.



Yann Martel Martel, Yann, photograph. AP Images.

**First Story Collection** After graduating from Concordia, Martel took a variety of jobs—tree planter, dishwasher, parking lot attendant, security guard, and librarian. Meanwhile, he wrote stories. His first work of fiction, consisting of four stories, was published under the title *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios* (1993). In the title story, a Canadian college student is forced to confront mortality when his nineteen-year-old friend Paul is diagnosed with AIDS. The story takes place over the nine-month period of Paul's decline and death. Paul and the narrator decide to lighten their mood by entertaining each other with stories; they invent the Roccamatios, "a Finnish family of Italian extraction," and weave their fictions around key events in twentieth-century history. The story won the Journey Prize for the best Canadian short story of 1991.

**Breakthrough with *Life of Pi*** Martel's first novel, *Self*, appeared in 1996. It is narrated by a young man who, on his eighteenth birthday, undergoes a metamorphosis into a woman. This premise allows for an extended meditation on identity and otherness, gender and sexual orientation, and—after the character undergoes a brutal rape by a neighbor—the body and its violation. After seven years as a woman, the narrator reverts to being a man. In a 2007 interview, Martel says that his exploration in *Self* originated from "the idea that the body is an environment, and just as we adapt to our outer environment, the body has an inner environment that we adapt to." Though the novel received the Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction and was up for other awards, it did not sell well.

His next endeavor, however, was both a critical and a commercial breakthrough. *Life of Pi* (2001), a tour de force combining religion, zoology, and adventure on the high seas, earned him worldwide praise and England's prestigious Booker Prize. The genesis for the novel came from two sources. One was a journey he took to India in 1997, with plans to write a novel. The other is a novella entitled *Max and the Cats*, by the Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar, in which a boy finds himself alone on a boat with a jaguar. According to interviews, Martel did not read the novella, but came across a newspaper review of it. The novel he had originally envisioned did not come to fruition, but while in India Martel remembered *Max and the Cats*, and from its premise the idea for *Life of Pi* took shape. Martel, who acknowledged Scliar's influence in a preface to the novel, was accused of plagiarism in some quarters. However, Scliar declined to press the case.

**Current Projects** Martel spent the academic year of 2002 through 2003 in Germany as a visiting professor at the Free University of Berlin. He published a collection of stories, *We Ate the Children Last*, in 2004. He now lives in Montreal. Martel gained attention in 2007 with a public project to mail selected books to the Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper. He has sent more than thirty paperback books, one every two weeks, each with an accompanying letter. His stated intention is to help the politician nurture "stillness" through literary appreciation.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Martel's famous contemporaries include:

- Douglas Coupland** (1961–): Canadian author who popularized zeitgeist terms such as "Generation X" and "McJob."
- David Foster Wallace** (1962–2008): American novelist and essayist, who is the author of *Infinite Jest*.
- Jonathan Lethem** (1964–): American novelist and essayist.
- Lisa Moore** (1964–): Canadian author whose works concern her background in Newfoundland.
- Colson Whitehead** (1969–): American novelist.
- Stephen Harper** (1959–): Prime minister of Canada (from 2006).

## Works in Literary Context

In his brief career, Yann Martel has written in an innovative style, and earned comparisons with a wide variety of literary artists. His works share some characteristics with those of magic realists such as Gabriel García Márquez, absurdist such as Samuel Beckett, and travel writers including Paul Theroux and Bruce Chatwin. He has been compared to Italo Calvino, Paul Auster, and Salman Rushdie, three inventive and philosophical novelists known for experimenting with the boundaries between genres.

**Philosophical Fiction** Martel studied philosophy as a college student, and metaphysical speculations are a strong undercurrent in his fiction. His most obvious thought experiment is his novel *Self*, an extended inquiry into the role gender plays in the construction of selfhood. Martel's early stories center on the power of creativity, imagination, and storytelling; the latter theme plays a key role toward the end of *Life of Pi*, when the narrator insists that his listeners select "the better story." Florence Stratton, writing in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, reads the conflict between the bureaucrats and Pi as one between two philosophical dispositions at variance with one another, the positivist and the poststructuralist. The novel, with its ambiguous conclusion, is open to diverse allegorical interpretations.

## Works in Critical Context

Yann Martel has won numerous literary prizes for his short stories and for the novel *Life of Pi*. Two stories from his first collection received awards. In addition, he won the 1993 Air Canada Award, given by the Canadian Authors Association, for the story "Bright Young New Thing." Capturing the prestigious Booker Prize in 2002

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a cunning variation on a perennial theme: the adventure of the castaway. This story goes back, literally, to the beginnings of recorded literature (if not the beginning of seafaring). Here are some notable examples of the genre:

- "The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor" (c. 2200 BCE). This brief tale from ancient Egypt tells the story of a sailor who encounters a giant serpent on an island and is the first known castaway tale in world literature.
- "The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor" (ninth century CE), a legend documented in the *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. The stories of the merchant who survives shipwreck after shipwreck in the Indian Ocean are among the most well-known tales from the book.
- Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a novel by Daniel Defoe. This classic castaway story is a landmark of Western literature.
- Lord of the Flies* (1954), a novel by William Golding. In this famous allegorical novel, a group of British boys stranded on a deserted island descend into warfare.
- Foe* (1986), a novel by J. M. Coetzee. A postmodern revision of *Robinson Crusoe* featuring a female castaway and characters named Cruso, Friday, and Daniel Foe.

for *Life of Pi* brought him into the front rank of contemporary writers with an international following. Reviewers have responded to Martel's blend of intellectual substance, emotional appeal, and experimental style.

Reviews of Martel's first novel, *Self*, were mixed. Some found the book an unsatisfying read due to its novel narrative structure and protean protagonist; others declared the novel a highly perceptive and engaging look at problems of gender and identity. *Life of Pi* earned near-universal enthusiasm from reviewers, though some found the novel's structure cumbersome and others were critical of its religious musings. *Life of Pi* has most engaged reviewers and critics as a postmodern philosophical novel concerned with the nature of religious faith and the connection between religion and the human need for narratives. Martel endorsed this interpretation in an interview with Sabine Sielke: "To say the book will make you believe in fiction, to me, isn't very far from saying it'll make you believe in God."

### Responses to Literature

1. Write about some of the liberties Martel takes with novelistic conventions, and his possible reasons for taking them.
2. In the novel *Self*, the protagonist unexpectedly transforms from a man to a woman. Through what

techniques does Martel convey the differences, and continuities, of identity created by this sudden shift?

3. Many critics view *Life of Pi* as an allegory, but for what? What is the novel's broader meaning?
4. What ideas does Martel express about the significance of stories in people's lives?
5. Martel was criticized after he admitted that he borrowed the premise of *Life of Pi* from another published work. What are your views about the line between influence and plagiarism? Is any book or piece of art truly "original" or is it always influenced by what precedes it?

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## Andrew Marvell

BORN: 1621, Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire, England

DIED: 1678, London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Miscellaneous Poems* (1681)



Andrew Marvell Popperfoto / Getty Images

## Overview

One of the last of the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets, Andrew Marvell is noted for intellectual, allusive poetry that is rich in metaphor and conceit. His work incorporates many of the elements associated with the Metaphysical school: the tension of opposing values, metaphorical complexities, logical and linguistic subtleties, and unexpected twists of thought and argument. The poems generally thought to be his best, such as "To His Coy Mistress" and "The Garden"—both first published in *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681)—are characterized by complexity and ambiguous morality, which critics believe both define his talent and account for his appeal.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Child of Turbulent Religious Times** In the first half of the seventeenth century, England was a country divided along religious lines. The Anglican Church, the official Church of England, had separated from the official Catholic Church of Rome during the previous century. In other English territories, however—such as Ireland—Roman Catholicism remained the prevailing mode of worship. Additionally, England itself became divided when a group known as Puritans, who believed the Anglican church had not moved far enough away from traditional Catholicism, gained support in the English Parliament. This ultimately led, during Marvell's lifetime, to a civil war that resulted in the execution of King

Charles I and the creation of the Commonwealth of England (later called a protectorate), ruled by Puritan military commander Oliver Cromwell. The monarchy was returned to power just eleven years after it was abolished, in 1660, with the restoration of Charles II to the throne.

The son of an Anglican clergyman, Marvell was born in Winestead-in-Holderness, Yorkshire. He received his early education at nearby Hull Grammar School and later attended Trinity College at Cambridge University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1638. Marvell remained at Cambridge until 1641, though he left without taking a master's degree. During the next four years, Marvell traveled in Europe, employed as a tutor. By the early 1650s he was living at Nunappleton in Yorkshire, where he was tutor to Mary Fairfax, the daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, retired commander-in-chief of the Commonwealth army under Oliver Cromwell. It was during his stay at Nunappleton that Marvell wrote most of the lyric poems that form the basis of his literary reputation. Marvell next moved to Eton to tutor Cromwell's ward William Dutton. In 1657 he was appointed Assistant Latin Secretary to the Council of State through the influence of his friend John Milton, who then held the post of Latin Secretary. Two years later, Marvell was elected Member of Parliament for Hull; from this point on he ceased to write lyric poetry, concentrating instead on political satire and polemics in prose. A dedicated, conscientious statesman, Marvell channeled all his energy and talent into his political career, serving in Parliament until his death. Although it has often been rumored that he was poisoned by his political enemies, it is now generally accepted that Marvell died of an accidental overdose of medicinal opiates.

**An Enigmatic Life** Much of Marvell's life remains shrouded in mystery. He is not thought to have married, yet shortly after his death a volume of his lyric poetry was published for the first time by a woman claiming to be his widow. That the woman in question, Mary Marvell, was truly Marvell's wife has yet to be either disproved or substantiated. More relevant to his poetry is the mystery of Marvell's political convictions, more accurate knowledge of which, scholars believe, would do much to clarify obscurities in his work. Marvell lived during a tumultuous period of British history. Although he did not actively participate in the English Civil War, which broke out in 1642 while he was traveling in Europe, Marvell was deeply affected by the bitter fighting between the Royalists (primarily supporters of Anglicanism) and Parliamentarians (primarily supporters of Puritanism) and later by Charles I's execution and Cromwell's assumption of the Protectorate. Scholars have often attempted to determine where Marvell's sympathies lay, but have been unable to definitively place the poet in either camp. Some suggest that this political inconclusiveness mirrors the indecision found in Marvell's poems. Regardless, critics

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Marvell's famous contemporaries include:

**Samuel Pepys** (1633–1703): A Member of Parliament and naval administrator, Pepys (pronounced “Peeps”) is most notable today for his diary, which he kept from 1660 to 1669. The diary provides a detailed account of daily life during the Restoration Period in England and documents the major English events of that decade: the Great Plague, the Great Fire of London, and the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

**Charles II** (1630–1685): The crowning of King Charles II marked the beginning of the Restoration period, so named for the restoration of the English monarchy after its abolition by Oliver Cromwell and the execution of Charles's father, King Charles I, in the wake of the English Civil War.

**Isaac Newton** (1642–1727): Perhaps the best-known scientist in history, Sir Isaac Newton's theories revolutionized mathematics, mechanics, astronomy, and optics. An eccentric genius, Newton's theoretical work covered such fundamental concepts as the force of gravity and the physics of motion, and he is credited as the cocreator of calculus.

**Molière** (1622–1673): The stage name for actor and playwright Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, Molière is still considered one of the great masters of theatrical comedy. His plays, among them *The Misanthrope* and *The School for Wives*, continue to be produced and adapted today.

**Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662): Mathematician and religious philosopher, Pascal made his legacy felt despite his premature death—he was a child prodigy and was already producing influential treatises on geometry by the age of sixteen. His work on probability theory is generally considered a cornerstone of both economics and social science.

**Rembrandt** (1606–1669): The leading painter of the Golden Age of Dutch Art, Rembrandt was a painter and etcher of unequaled proficiency. His mastery of portraiture made him well known across Europe during his lifetime; his self-portraits create a fascinating chronicle of his life.

have emphasized that an understanding of Marvell's life and poetry, particularly “An Horatian Ode on Cromwell's Return from Ireland,” requires some comprehension of this politically volatile time.

### Works in Literary Context

**Duality** Marvell directly addressed the theme of the duality of spirituality and temporality in many of his overtly religious poems, including “A Dialogue between

the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure” and “A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body.” As their titles indicate, both these poems are discussions between the body and its pleasures on the one hand and the soul and its spirituality on the other, yet critics have remarked on an important distinction between the two works. In “A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure,” Marvell uncharacteristically and, many commentators believe, unsatisfactorily, resolves the conflict. In this poem, Pleasure tempts the Soul with such delights as music, beauty, wealth, and knowledge, only to be tersely rebuffed each time. This soul is indeed resolved; the result of the “debate” is a foregone conclusion. This has led many critics to prefer “A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body,” in which the tension between the two is greater and the resolution less clear. Not strictly a debate, the poem consists of the lamentations of both body and soul, interdependent yet compelled in different directions by their very natures. Commentators have noted that the body in this poem is not the wily tempter that Created Pleasure is, but rather an essential complement to the soul, and thus their eternal struggle is insoluble.

**Ambiguity** Political poems, such as “An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland” and “Upon Appleton House,” have prompted much critical debate due to their ambiguity. “An Horatian Ode” in particular has invited biographical interpretation as commentators have attempted to clarify Marvell's real attitude toward the political and social upheavals of the Civil War and Cromwell's assumption of the Protectorate. Ostensibly a paean to Cromwell's military and political victories, “An Horatian Ode” includes a moving and sympathetic description of Charles I's execution that commentators have found disconcerting. An additional critical dilemma has been raised by subtle hints in the poem that indicate the poet's belief that Cromwell's base of power, founded as it was on usurpation and bloodshed, may have been inevitable but can hardly be praiseworthy. Ambiguities also abound in “Upon Appleton House,” outwardly a poem in praise of the retirement of Marvell's benefactor Fairfax from the political arena. The extent to which this praise may be regarded as sincere has long been a critical stumbling block, as the rest of the poem seems to endorse the course of action and movement.

### Works in Critical Context

**Critical Legacy** The history of critical assessment of Marvell's work is one of shifting focuses and sharp reversals. During his lifetime and for generations after his death, Marvell was known primarily for his political career; he was lauded as an upright, incorruptible statesman, his name becoming synonymous with disinterested patriotism. Consequently, his prose satires and polemics, controversial and often severe attacks on government policy, were highly praised. Works such as *The Rehearsall*

*Transpros'd* (1672), a satire against religious intolerance, and *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England* (1677), an attack on the absolute power of monarchy, were valued perhaps less for their literary merit than for the evidence they afforded of Marvell's political views. His poetry, when it was considered at all, was judged to be clever and talented, but of secondary importance; throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Marvell's reputation was that of a major statesman but a minor poet.

In the nineteenth century, critical opinion began to shift: critics of Marvell, though few in number, assigned his poetry a greater importance, while his prose works suffered a corresponding decline in popularity. William Hazlitt praised the "elegance and tenderness in his descriptive poems," while decrying Marvell's "forced, far-fetched method of treating his subject" in the political satires. Nineteenth-century commentators emphasized what they deemed his "Romantic" attributes: the theme of the mutability of earthly life in "To His Coy Mistress," the description of nature and solitude in "The Garden," and the sensitive portrayal of human emotion in "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Faun." In the twentieth century, critical appraisal of Marvell's work has undergone a still more radical metamorphosis. Although the satires continue to be generally censured for their heavy-handedness and crudity—considered of some historical interest, perhaps, but of negligible literary importance—the lyric poetry has come to be seen in an entirely new light, largely due to T. S. Eliot's pivotal essay of 1921. Eliot emphasized for the first time Marvell's Metaphysical wit, the recognition of which has both enlarged and redefined subsequent critical thought. As Marvell is now seen to be closely allied to the Metaphysical school, so also is he viewed as a much more complex and rewarding poet, both thematically and stylistically, than had been previously assumed.

**"To His Coy Mistress"** Many of Marvell's poems once considered simple and straightforward are now believed to be suggestive of deeper themes; an example of this is provided by one of his most famous poems, "To His Coy Mistress." For years, "To His Coy Mistress" was assumed to be a fairly representative example of the Cavalier carpe diem (literally "seize the day") love poetry popular among the courtier poets of Charles I and typified by Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Recent criticism, however, has revealed complexities and ambiguities within the poem, which most critics believe undermine the ostensible message; the suspicion of narrative irony and the curiously inappropriate imagery of the poem cast doubt on its true meaning.

The inherent ambiguity of this poem and others is now recognized as the key to understanding much of Marvell's work. Many critics believe that the ambiguities are far more than clever devices and that Marvell's recurring themes exemplify the nature of ambiguity itself.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The sixteenth century saw the development of a brand of verse known as Metaphysical poetry, a forerunner of existentialism. Some of the better-known Metaphysical works include:

*Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), a poem by John Donne. The man perhaps most closely associated with the Metaphysical movement (a label, incidentally, that was only applied in retrospect), Donne, like Marvell, was not above mixing politics and poetry, as in this anti-Catholic polemic that mocks the Jesuit order and name-checks several prominent scientists of the day, including Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo Galilei.

*The Temple* (1633), a poetry collection by George Herbert. An Anglican priest, Herbert concerned himself mostly with religious themes in his poems—several have been turned into hymns. Nearly all of his poetry is contained in this volume.

*Silex Scintillans* (1655), a poetry collection by Henry Vaughan. Like Herbert, Vaughan was a Welsh poet, but his poetry initially focused more on the natural world and its beauty. After he met Herbert, however, he experienced a religious conversion and produced this volume of "sacred poems," becoming a noted and respected poet in the process.

Indeed, such critics claim that underlying all of Marvell's poetry is a unifying and omnipresent concern with a central ambiguity, the tension and duality of opposites, and that this is most often and most successfully expressed through his treatment of the duality of the body and the soul, the temporal and the divine. All these tensions, critics have noted, place the poems in a fundamentally spiritual or moral context, as each involves opposing human attributes or choices.

**"A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body"** Marvell's failure to resolve the conflict he presents in "A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body" is but one example of what many critics have seen as deliberate irresolution in his work. This intended ambiguity has frustrated some critics and impressed others with an appreciation of the poet's control over every nuance of meaning and feeling in his poetry; the latter critics have contended that Marvell's ambiguity is indicative not so much of indecision as it is of his recognition of the potentials and possibilities of both sides of an issue. The tensions found in Marvell's poetry arise not merely from the usual Metaphysical attempt to reconcile opposites; as George deForest Lord has stated in his 1968 introduction to *Andrew Marvell: A Collection of Critical Essays*:

## Karl Marx

“Ambiguity for Marvell is not so much a feature of style as it is a way of feeling, thinking, and imagining embedded in his sensibility and in his view of the human condition.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Summarize Marvell’s treatises against tyranny and oppression. Whom does he view as the oppressor? Are these political tracts as ambiguous as Marvell’s poems?
2. Contrast “To His Coy Mistress” with some of William Shakespeare’s love lyrics. Identify how both authors utilize or reject irony in their works.
3. Outline Marvell’s role in the completion of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. How critical do you feel Marvell was to completion of that epic poem? Why?
4. Write a modern-day dialogue between Andrew Marvell and a girl to whom he speaks in “To His Coy Mistress”, including all of the arguments he uses in this poem and her counterarguments.

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## Karl Marx

BORN: 1818, Trier, Germany

DIED: 1883, London, England

NATIONALITY: German

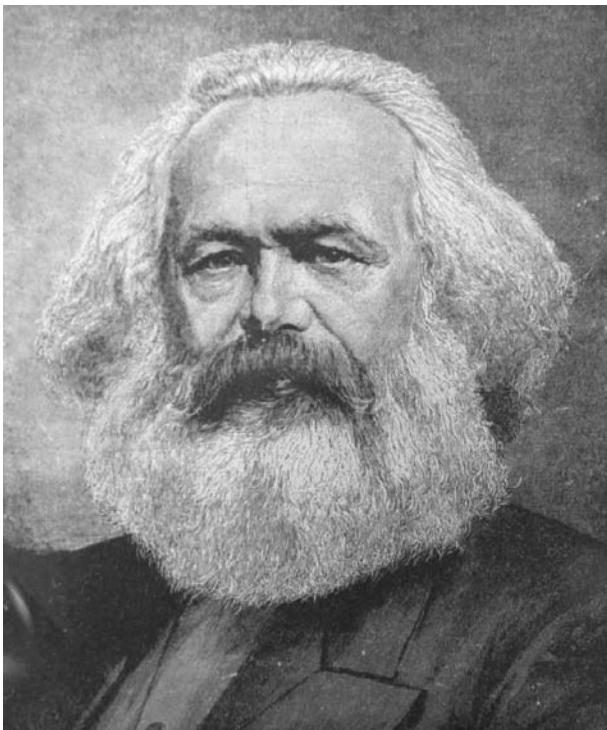
GENRE: Nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Communist Manifesto* (1848)  
*Capital* (1867, 1885, 1894)

### Overview

The writings of Karl Marx have significantly influenced the course of world history over the last 150 years. Together with Friedrich Engels, he defined the modern concept of socialism, a major contribution to the wide range of new social theories developed in the nineteenth century. The principles of his social and economic theories, often called Marxism, have been applied in the social sciences and humanities, and more or less misapplied in the political arena. He was also a political activist, and his ideas inspired revolutionaries and political leaders in every part of the world. Their achievements confirm the truth—while perhaps challenging the value—of one of his most famous quotations: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”



Karl Marx Marx, Karl, photograph. The Library of Congress.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Family Rejection of the Historical for the Material** Karl Heinrich Marx was born on May 5, 1818, in the Prussian (today German) city of Trier. His father, Heinrich, was an attorney whose outlook on life followed the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire. Both of Marx's parents were descended from generations of rabbis; however, since Prussia barred Jews from holding public office, Heinrich Marx chose to undergo baptism, and to baptize his son as well.

Marx got his high school education at a liberal school called the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium. He proved adept at languages—eventually learning to read at least seven—but did poorly in history. Given that the philosophy he went on to found is sometimes known as “historical materialism,” this fact is not without irony. Graduating from school at age seventeen, Marx went on to the University of Bonn in 1835. After a year of lackluster performance, he transferred to the University of Berlin, studying philosophy and law.

**Young Hegelian** In Berlin he joined the “Doctor-klub,” a group of students interested in philosophy, especially the ideas of Gottfried Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel’s dialectical theory views human progress as the result of a clash between opposing movements or social forces (the “thesis” and “antithesis”), which eventually fuse into a “synthesis.” The avant-garde “Young Hegelians” in this club sought to apply Hegel’s theory to challenge the ruling institutions of European society, including the church.

Marx accepted the Hegelian dialectic as part of the philosophy he was developing, but rejected Hegel’s belief that ideas and spiritual forces matter more than objects in the physical world. Rather than this idealist view, grounded in Christian thought, Marx maintained that human beings make their own history, influenced only by the material conditions and social formations around them. Thus, Marx characterized his emerging theory as “dialectical materialism.”

**Editorship, Marriage, and Engels** In 1841, Marx received his doctorate after completing a dissertation on the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus and Epicurus. Unable to obtain a teaching position, he began contributing articles to a new liberal-radical Cologne newspaper, *Die Rheinische Zeitung*, and soon became the paper’s editor. His bold political commentary attracted great attention from the Prussian censors, who shut the paper down early in 1843.

That June, Marx married Jenny von Westphalen after a seven-year engagement. She was the daughter of a baron who had been a tutor to the young Marx. The couple moved to Paris, a socialist center with a more permissive atmosphere, where Marx went to work on a journal called the *German-French Yearbook*.

The publication collapsed after one issue, but through the project, Marx became acquainted with Friedrich Engels, the son of a cotton mill owner, who became his closest friend and lifelong collaborator. The two men met in the spring of 1844, and—though Marx was not at first wildly enthused with the rather brash young Engels—began working together not long thereafter.

**The Communist Manifesto and Eventual Statelessness** In January of 1845 Marx was expelled from Paris at the request of the Prussian government, because of two anti-Prussian essays he had published in a radical Paris newspaper. With his family, he went to Brussels, and Engels followed soon afterward. There, Marx began to organize among the working classes and wrote the books *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847) and, with Engels, *The German Ideology* (published posthumously in 1932). The latter work is perhaps the fullest statement of Marx’s materialist theory of history as determined by economic conditions.

At its congress in November of 1847, the London-based Communist League commissioned Marx and Engels to write its political program. Their statement, now known as *The Communist Manifesto*, was first published in pamphlet form in January of 1848. Here the theories of Marx and Engels appear in concise language with minimal jargon. The *Manifesto* declares that all history boils down to the struggles between classes. In the modern age, the primary class antagonism is between the oppressive “bourgeoisie,” the wealthy captains of industry, and the “proletariat,” particularly the urban poor. Marx and Engels predict that this struggle will intensify until the proletariat, organized internationally as a class, finally overthrows the bourgeoisie and builds a classless society.

The *Manifesto* was intended to serve as a call for rebellion, not a model for communist government. As it happened, insurrections did erupt in Europe in 1848; ironically, they were mostly led by bourgeois nationalists, not the “workers of the world,” and all were violently suppressed. Forced to leave Belgium, Marx witnessed and reported on the revolutions in France and Germany, but was expelled from both countries as the uprisings were crushed. In 1849, he took refuge in London. He lived there the rest of his life, a citizen of no country.

**Capital and the Lack Thereof, Journalism, and the Study of Economics** During his first years in London, Marx spent most of his time in the reading room of the British Museum, studying economics. He worked as a journalist for the *New York Daily Tribune* and other papers, submitting hundreds of articles (including many actually written by Engels). The pay was poor, however, and Marx was often unable to feed and clothe his family properly. Three of his children died within a few years. However, he refused to accept more lucrative work, devoting himself to his writing and revolutionary activism. Later on, he received steady financial help from

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Marx's famous contemporaries include:

- Friedrich Engels** (1820–1895): A German philosopher and sociologist and coauthor with Marx of *The Communist Manifesto*.
- Charles Darwin** (1809–1882): The British scientist known as the originator of the theory of evolution by natural selection.
- Pierre-Joseph Proudhon** (1809–1865): The French socialist-anarchist philosopher who coined the phrase, "property is theft."
- Charles Dickens** (1812–1870): A British author of classic novels such as *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*.
- Harriet Beecher Stowe** (1811–1896): An American abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- Abraham Lincoln** (1809–1865): The American president during the Civil War, famous for abolishing slavery in the United States.

Engels, who worked his way up in his father's business to support his friend.

After the tremors of 1848, Marx expected a new round of revolutions at the next economic downturn. He wrote two long pamphlets on contemporary French history, *The Class Struggles in France* (1850) and the trenchant *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852). His most important writings, on economics, were large in magnitude and slow to appear. He published his first *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859. Only the first volume of his magnum opus, *Capital* (frequently referred to by its German title, *Das Kapital*), appeared in his lifetime, in 1867. The second and third volumes, extensively edited by Engels, were published in 1885 and 1894.

*Capital* takes a systematic, scientific approach to studying the relations between capital and labor. Marx expanded on and critiqued the theories of economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. His major contributions to social and economic thought—such as the theories of surplus value, alienation and exploitation of human labor, the means and relations of production, commodity fetishism, and the process by which global markets exacerbate class conflict—are all found in these volumes. His reasoning led him to the conclusion that the processes of capitalism will lead that system inevitably to its own collapse, out of which will emerge a socialist era.

***The First International: Building Consciousness***  
Marx was also actively engaged in bringing about that

socialist era through the International Working Men's Association, or the First International. From its inception in 1864, he assumed a leading role in this coalition of workers' organizations from numerous countries and various political ideologies. Marx always maintained that a successful socialist revolution could only come at the right historical moment, after the workers had gradually achieved sufficient consciousness of their exploitation and their class solidarity. He opposed more militant factions, such as the anarchists led by Mikhail Bakunin, and energetically sought to establish international connections and consensus at the organization's annual congresses. The movement grew to a peak membership of eight hundred thousand by the end of the 1860s but which declined when its general council moved from London to New York in 1872.

Ill health and depression reduced Marx's productivity in the last ten years of his life. His wife died in 1881, and his eldest daughter in January of 1883. He himself passed away only two months later. Thus, he did not survive to experience the triumph of his ideas among European democratic mass parties in the 1880s and 1890s. A great many of his works, including the final two volumes of *Capital*, were published posthumously, some as late as 1941.

### Works in Literary Context

Some of the major influences on Marx's thought include social thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau; earlier political economists, notably Smith and Ricardo; Hegel, from whom Marx borrowed his dialectical method; Ludwig Feuerbach, who challenged the Christian assumptions in Hegel's thought; and the French socialist-anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who attacked the concept of private property. Some scholars have detected the influence of classical Greek thinkers such as Aristotle on Marx's relentless rationality. One more influence not to be ignored is that of Friedrich Engels, a notable author himself, who had already written *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844) before joining forces with Marx.

***The Power of the Working Class*** Marx's work is notable for its emphasis on the power held by the working class in a society. For centuries, and in many ways still today, those who performed the most laborious tasks—farmers, factory workers, and low-level tradespeople—have been given little say in the operation of the government under which they live. Marx pointed out that these workers actually produce the basic materials of value for a society and were therefore an important resource that was being exploited instead of being rewarded. Although these workers had little official power, Marx argued that they potentially held economic power through their numbers and through their ability to produce—or through the conscious decision not to produce—goods.

**Coherence and Consistency** One remarkable characteristic of Karl Marx's writings is the consistency of philosophical perspective and premise. Many of the specifics of his political prescriptions changed over time; his program for the First International, for example, differed significantly from the *Communist Manifesto*, especially in its emphasis on labor unions as a vehicle for working-class empowerment. However, it is generally acknowledged that Marx's mature conclusions had been formulated as early as the 1840s, in good part through his famous meetings with Engels.

**Worldwide Impact** Karl Marx's ideas have had a stunningly deep impact—perhaps greater than that of any other single political thinker of the modern age—around the world and in many fields of human endeavor. The language, questions, assertions, and predictions in his prose have entered the standard discourse of politics, economics, history, and cultural criticism. His theory is cited just as often by its opponents as by its adherents. Among the countless Marxist or neo-Marxist thinkers and writers of the twentieth century, some of the most prominent have included Antonio Gramsci, Jean-Paul Sartre, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse (and other theorists of the Frankfurt School), and the historians E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Marxian formulations, such as his emphasis on ideology and false consciousness, are fundamental to the intersecting bodies of late twentieth-century scholarship known as critical theory.

**Lenin, Mao, and Communism** Last but not least, the theories of Karl Marx have profoundly affected a large proportion of the world's population through their incorporation into the communist revolutions in Russia, China, and elsewhere. Marx himself never drew up a clear outline for communist governance, much less revolution as such; he saw a revolution as inevitable, but also imagined that it would be predicated on the growth of critical consciousness among the workers of the world. However, the major leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky, both viewed themselves as heirs to Marx. Later on, a rift developed between them, and to this day Leninist and Trotskyist political parties spar over their conflicting interpretations of Marx. Mao Zedong also claimed a Marxist lineage but developed a Chinese variant in which peasants, rather than urban industrial workers, were the main class forces in the revolution. At the high-water mark of Third World socialism and communism, nearly half the world's population lived under governments that claimed allegiance to the principles of Karl Marx.

### Works in Critical Context

Karl Marx did not live to witness the profound political and social impact of his thinking. The immediate reception of most of his writings was modest. For example, some people erroneously believe that the uprisings of

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A vast body of literature attempts to analyze Karl Marx's works and apply them to a wide range of fields. Here are a few of the more well-known works of Marxism:

*State and Revolution* (1917), a political text by Vladimir Lenin. Written in the midst of the Soviet revolution by its main leader, this pamphlet clarifies the approach the Bolsheviks would take in organizing a communist state.

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), an analytical work by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. This is the signature work of the Frankfurt School of Marxist critics, including their critique of Enlightenment philosophy and the "culture industry."

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), an education text by Paulo Freire. This classic describes an innovative, class-conscious approach to popular education, as developed among Brazilian adults.

*Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971), a collection of essays and fragments by Antonio Gramsci. These are the most systematic writings of one of the twentieth century's most important Marxist thinkers.

*Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), a literary theory text by Terry Eagleton. Eagleton's treatise is a seminal work of critical theory, describing a method for uncovering and analyzing the ideological underpinnings of literary texts.

1848 sprang more or less directly from *The Communist Manifesto*, but at the time of its publication, it was not widely read. In the decades after Marx's death, however, larger political parties on the left, such as Germany's Social Democratic Party, began to adopt a Marxist orientation. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which took place during World War I (1914–1918), brought a great deal more attention, both positive and negative, to Marx's work.

**The Communist Manifesto** *The Communist Manifesto*, a relatively short pamphlet and surely Marx's most-read work, has rarely failed to spark debate. One debate surrounding this text has been its actual status as a piece of literature. As long ago as 1901—four years before the first major revolution in Russia and sixteen years before its successful progeny, the 1917 Russian Revolution inspired by Marx's thought—prominent Polish socialist Karl Kautsky observed that the document offered a useful guide for socialist revolutionaries, but warned too that "it is no gospel, no bible, as it has been called, the words of which are holy words, but an historic document that should be subjected to criticism." In a very different register, key social thinker Joseph Schumpeter argued

that “in one important sense, Marxism *is* a religion. To the believer it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions; and, secondly, a guide to those ends, which implies a plan of salvation and the indication of the evil from which mankind, or a chosen section of mankind, is to be saved.” For Schumpeter and for countless others, Marx was a prophet of sorts—and like most prophets throughout history, prone both to important inaccuracies and to being used for a wide variety of political ends.

**The End of History and Marx in the Twenty-first Century** Today, Marx is universally recognized as one of the most important thinkers of the modern era. Alongside such giants as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, he expressed ideas that changed the world immensely. Although his analysis of capitalism remains powerfully astute, many of his expectations and predictions have not been borne out by subsequent history. For example, he thought that the contradictions of capitalism would quickly intensify, not anticipating the rise of labor regulations, pensions, and other social reforms in market societies. More importantly still, he did not see how a “consumer society” would develop to help relieve the tension caused by the excess inherent in the system of capitalism. He also failed to anticipate that his “dictatorship of the proletariat,” when it took shape in revolutionary societies like the Soviet Union, could lead to the shrinking of human freedoms rather than to their expansion.

It is crucial to distinguish, however, between what Marx himself believed and what his followers have done in his name. Among those who proudly consider themselves Marxists, there is considerable diversity and bitter debate over how to interpret Marx’s words and apply his theoretical constructs to current events and political battles. Among his opponents, the term “Marxist” is an epithet broadly, and often inaccurately, invoked against liberal politicians and public policies intended to regulate the free market and distribute resources equitably. Chiding some of the more radical French activists shortly before his death, Marx is said to have remarked, “If that is Marxism, then I am not a Marxist.”

Most recent interpretations of Marx have focused on how his ideas could be transferred to or translated for a post-Communist world. After the fall of the “iron curtain” separating the Soviet bloc from the West, and the discrediting of Communism as a mode of government, many observers have argued that socialist, Marxist thought is no longer even possible. Famously, U.S. government policy analyst Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in 1989 an “End of History,” arguing that it was no longer possible to even imagine a historical alternative to capitalist democracy. He wrote, “The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western

liberalism . . . since the egalitarianism of modern America represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx.” This is, for good reason, a hotly contested—and, some argue, a hopelessly naïve or even willfully cynical—perspective. On the other end of the spectrum, though, a neo-Marxism has emerged, represented by thinkers like Slovenian psychoanalyst and philosopher Slavoj Zizek. Zizek makes the case that a careful reading of Marx must make us suspicious of today’s “humanitarian” capitalists such as Bill Gates and George Soros, arguing that “the same Soros [for example] who gives millions to fund education has ruined the lives of thousands thanks to his financial speculations and in doing so created the conditions for the rise of the intolerance he denounces.” For Zizek and many other thinkers on the Left today, Marx’s thought has not only survived the death of Soviet communism, but is perhaps more vital today than ever before.

## Responses to Literature

1. Evaluate the prose style of *The Communist Manifesto*. How do the tone and language help achieve the purposes of the piece?
2. Define and summarize one of the key concepts of Marx’s theory of economics, such as “surplus value.” Can you find an example of this concept in the real world?
3. Research the state of industrial development in Europe at the time Marx began his career. What were the conditions that motivated his critique of capitalism?
4. What differences do you see between the ideas in Marx’s own writing and the way his ideas were used by Lenin and Stalin in building the Soviet Union?
5. Research the history of socialism before Marx. Where does the term come from, and what was original in Marx’s conceptualization of socialism?

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## W. Somerset Maugham

BORN: 1874, Paris, France

DIED: 1965, Nice, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Novels, short stories, plays

MAJOR WORKS:

*Of Human Bondage* (1915)

*The Moon and Sixpence* (1919)

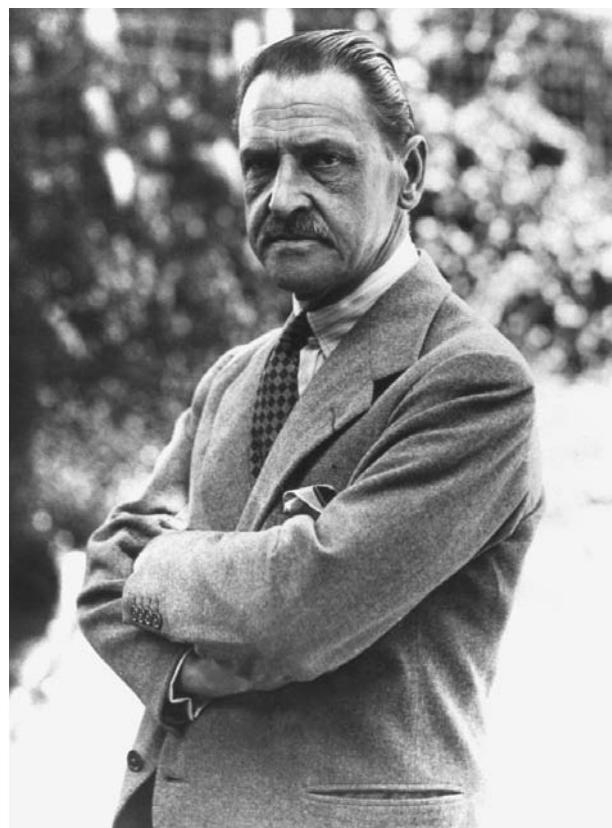
*The Painted Veil* (1925)

*Cakes and Ale; or, The Skeleton in the Cupboard* (1930)

*The Razor's Edge* (1944)

### Overview

W. Somerset Maugham, during a career that spanned sixty-five years, attained great renown first as a dramatist, then as the author of entertaining and carefully crafted short stories and novels. Maugham's productivity has sometimes hindered his critical reception, leading commentators to assess him as a merely competent professional writer. A number of his works, however, most notably the novels *Of Human Bondage*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *Cakes and Ale; or, The Skeleton in the Cupboard*, and *The Razor's Edge*, and the short stories "The Letter" and "Rain," are acclaimed as masterpieces of twentieth-century literature.



W. Somerset Maugham *Maugham, W. Somerset, photograph*. AP Images.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**To England and Back** William Somerset Maugham was born in Paris, France in 1874, the son of solicitor to the British embassy, Robert Ormond Maugham and Edith Mary (Snell) Maugham. His father died when he was eight and his mother when he was twelve, and he was raised by his father's brother, a clergyman. When he was thirteen, he was sent to King's School, Cambridge, in England, where he was supposed to prepare for a career as a clergyman. He was more interested in writing, though, and got his uncle's permission to study in Heidelberg, Germany. He ultimately decided to study medicine and trained for six years in a hospital in London. Although he spent a year-long internship in the London slums, he never went into medical practice. Instead, he moved to Paris, where he worked on his writing and lived in poverty. His first play, *Lady Frederick*, was produced in 1907, and was followed by three others within a year. Thus he launched his long and illustrious career as a writer.

**Playwright Success, and Back to England** *Lady Frederick* met with considerable success, and Maugham

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Maugham's famous contemporaries include:

- Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): Famous American expatriate writer whose name is synonymous with the Great American Novel.
- C. S. Lewis** (1898–1963): Irish writer and scholar known for his work on literary criticism, Christian apologetics, and medieval literature. Best known for his series *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1965).
- Sergio Osmeña** (1878–1961): Fourth president of the Commonwealth of the Philippines and founder of the Nacionalista Party.
- J. R. R. Tolkien** (1892–1973): English writer, philologist, poet, and university professor best known for his fantasy classics *The Hobbit* (1936) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955).

quickly attained celebrity as a dramatist. In the play, Lady Frederick foregoes a fortune she desperately requires to stave off loan sharks and then generously disillusions a captive young lord. A play that a theater manager had accepted against his better judgment as a stopgap of several weeks, *Lady Frederick* had to be transferred to four successive theaters to satisfy public demand. Maugham returned to England to continue his career in drama.

In 1908, four of Maugham's plays—*Lady Frederick*, *Jack Straw*, *Mrs. Dot*, and *The Explorer*—ran simultaneously in London theaters. Over the next twenty-six years, twenty-nine of Maugham's plays would be produced, many of them among the most well received of their time.

**Importance of the Tale** The writer, for Maugham, was a purveyor of pleasure, and what he wrote about was more important than how it was presented. He said, "With me the sense is more than the sound, the substance is more than the form, the moral significance is more than the rhetorical adornment." He added, "I wrote stories because it was a delight to write them."

*Of Human Bondage*, however, "was written in pain." Its principal character, Philip Carey, sensitive and plagued with a clubfoot, was so like the author, who was afflicted with a stutter, that Maugham was unable to read the book after it was published. Perhaps to avoid similar pain, Maugham later chose to write about other people and found material for stories everywhere.

**Wartime Intelligence Work** At the onset of World War I, Maugham joined the Red Cross and went to France as an interpreter. There he met Frederick Gerald Haxton and the two became lovers, remaining close companions for the next thirty years until Haxton's

death. During the war, because he was considered too old for battle, the British government recruited Maugham as an intelligence agent and subsequently involved him in covert operations in Switzerland and Russia. These experiences formed the basis of his 1928 novel *Ashenden; or, The British Secret Agent*, about a playwright who becomes a British secret agent. Despite the ongoing relationship with Haxton, in 1917 Maugham married Syrie Barnardo Wellcome, with whom he had had a child two years earlier. They divorced in 1929. During the years between the world wars, Maugham lived lavishly and wrote prolifically. He bought an expansive villa in southeast France, which remained his home thereafter, although he traveled widely. His visits to Italy, the United States, the South Seas, and the Caribbean provided the settings for his works that appeared between the world wars, including the novels *The Moon and Sixpence* and *Cakes and Ale*. Maugham fled France during the Nazi occupation of World War II and went to the United States, where he lectured and oversaw the Hollywood production of several motion pictures based on his stories and novels. Haxton, who had accompanied Maugham, died in 1944. In 1948 Maugham returned to France.

**The Compulsive Writing Years** By 1959 this compulsive writer was writing, he said, only for himself. At the time of his death he was reportedly working on an autobiography that was to be published posthumously. A few years before his death he destroyed all of his old notebooks and unfinished manuscripts. He continued to assert that "literature, or pure imaginative creation, was the highest goal toward which man could strive." Maugham died in Nice, France, in 1965.

### Works in Literary Context

**Colonialism and the Short Story Form** Maugham has received greatest recognition for his short fiction. He emerged as a preeminent short story writer in the 1920s, and many commentators maintain that he consistently achieved excellence in this genre, concurring with Anthony Burgess that "the short story was Maugham's true *métier*, and some of the stories he wrote are among the best in the language." Maugham's most successful short stories—which include "Before the Party," "The Book-Bag," "The Pool," "Mr. Harrington's Washing," "The Letter," and "Rain"—exploit the oppressive atmosphere of Britain's colonies and feature petty intrigue, marital infidelity, and sometimes violent death against a background of the rigidly stratified colonial communities in India and the Far East. In "The Letter," for example, the wife of an English plantation owner in Singapore shoots and kills a man whom she claims forced his way into her room. Her lawyer, however, discovers a letter she wrote to the murdered man arranging a tryst on the night of his death. In "Rain" a medical quarantine isolates a number of travelers, including Sadie Thompson, a

prostitute; Dr. and Mrs. Macphail; and the Davidsons, a missionary couple, in a remote port of Pago Pago. Mr. Davidson becomes obsessed with reforming the flamboyant prostitute, and he bullies her into submission with the threat of a prison term. One night he is found dead, having cut his own throat. Sadie Thompson is angrily defiant, and the words she hurls at Dr. Macphail—"You men! You filthy, dirty pigs! You're all the same, all of you. Pigs! Pigs!"—suggest that what passed between her and the missionary was not entirely spiritual in nature. These two stories are among the most frequently anthologized in world literature; both have undergone several stage and film adaptations.

**Espionage and Secrets** Maugham's Ashenden stories, based on his experiences in the secret service, are credited with originating a style of sophisticated international espionage fiction that has remained popular for decades. His stories resemble his dramas in structure: plots hinge and pivot on a secret; suspense is heightened by the possibility of revelation; and tension builds on strategically timed entrances and exits, lost and found properties, and verbal combat. In fact, Maugham often transformed short stories into plays and rewrote unperformed dramas as novels or short stories, and this ease of adaptation attests to the unity of Maugham's literary construction.

**Influences** Maugham believed Graham Greene was the best British novelist, and he liked William Faulkner. Though critics attributed influences on Maugham to such authors as Dickens, Fielding, Defoe, and Trollope, Maugham once said, "I follow no master, and acknowledge none." In similar respect, Maugham is said to have influenced such differing writers as John le Carré, Ian Fleming, and Graham Greene with his skill at espionage novels.

### Works in Critical Context

"In my twenties," Maugham once wrote, "the critics said I was brutal. In my thirties they said I was flippant, in my forties they said I was cynical, in my fifties they said I was competent, and in my sixties they say I am superficial." John Brophy called Maugham's writings "extroverted." Yet Maugham was "the most continuously readable storyteller of our lifetime," said Christopher Morley. He was, Walter Allen added, "the last survivor of a vanished age, an age which had not divorced, as ours has largely done, the idea of entertainment from the idea of art."

While many of his works have earned great accolades, just as many continue to be read, reread, and discussed. Among them, one, *Of Human Bondage*, stands out as his best.

**Of Human Bondage (1915)** Based on an early manuscript called "The Artistic Temperament of Stephen Carey," Maugham's semiautobiographical coming-of-age novel chronicles the youth and early adulthood of Philip Carey as he struggles to retain his freedom and individuality within a rigid society. Reviews of the book were mixed upon its publication in 1915. R. Ellis Roberts, in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Maugham and his fiction are often associated with the twilight of British colonialism in Asia and the Pacific. Here are some other works that highlight the changing influence of the British Empire in the early to middle twentieth century:

*A Passage to India* (1924), by E. M. Forster. This novel centers on the accusation of rape made by a white British woman against an Indian man. Forster's novel is set against the backdrop of the growing independence movement in India in the 1920s.

*Burmese Days* (1934), by George Orwell. Orwell based this novel on his five years of service in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (now called Myanmar).

*The Long Day Wanes* (1959), by Anthony Burgess. This collection of three novels takes its name from the old saying "The sun never sets on the British Empire." Set in British Malaya (modern Malaysia), the novels take place during the 1950s, leading up to the final withdrawal of the British from Southeast Asia.

*Our Man in Havana* (1958), by Graham Greene. Greene spins a tale of a hapless vacuum cleaner salesman caught up in British espionage efforts in Cuba in the 1950s.

*Midnight's Children* (1981), by Salman Rushdie. Considered a landmark in postcolonial literature, this novel is set at the time of the independence of India in 1947.

a review for the *Bookman*, called it "a remarkably clever book," but added about the author, "It is no disrespect to this piece of work to wish him a rather robuster subject for his next novel." William Morton Payne, in his review for the *Dial*, objected to the book's unnecessary length, though he conceded that "allowing once for all its inartistic method, it is at least a noteworthy piece of creative composition."

### Responses to Literature

1. Consider the disabilities and abilities of the characters in *Of Human Bondage*. How are they contrasted? How do they make the characters endearing? Also, as you read, take note of any favorite lines of dialogue or description that you find striking.
2. Find a favorite passage or two from the novel and write it (or them) down. Then, with three or four peers, drop the favorites into a hat. Have each person draw a paper from the hat, then take turns discussing how that quote expresses the values of the people and/or the period of the novel.

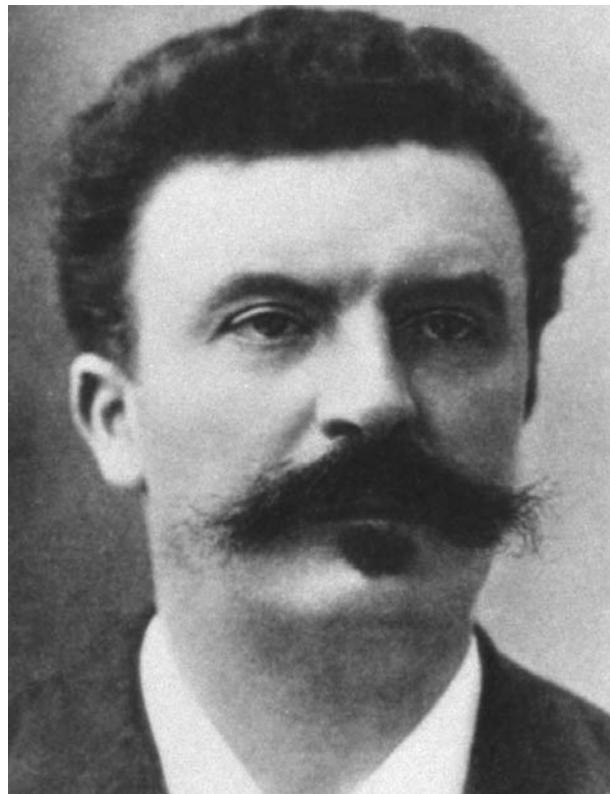
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Guy de Maupassant *Maupassant, Guy de, photograph*.

## Guy de Maupassant

BORN: 1850, Normandy, France

DIED: 1893, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

- "Boule de suif" ("Ball of Tallow") (1880)  
"La Parure" ("The Diamond Necklace") (1884)  
"Le Horla" ("The Horla") (1887)

### Overview

Guy de Maupassant is considered one of the finest short-story writers of all time and a champion of the realistic approach to writing. His work is characterized by the clarity of its prose and the objective irony of its presentation, as well as its keen re-creation of the physical world. To the realist's ideal of precise speech, Maupassant added an economy of language and created a narrative style noted for its power, simplicity, and vivid sensuousness.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Dissolution of Family and Nation** Henri René Albert Guy de Maupassant, the first child of Laure le Poittevin and Gustave de Maupassant, was born on August 5, 1850, near Dieppe in Normandy, France. After

a bitter and unhappy life together, Maupassant's parents separated when he was eleven years old, and Maupassant was raised by his mother. He attended schools in Paris and Rouen and eventually earned a bachelor's degree.

The Franco-Prussian War broke out in July of 1870. Maupassant, who had gone to Paris to study law, enlisted in the army immediately. The war was good for Prussia, concluding with the declaration of the existence of a new nation-state—Germany—but involved a series of terrible defeats for France. Maupassant was bitterly disappointed by the devastating outcome, in which Paris was briefly occupied by the Prussians, France lost the territory of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany (a region that would continue to be hotly contested through both the First and Second World Wars, as well as the intervening peace), and the French government collapsed. After the war, Maupassant worked as a clerk in the naval office of the reconstituted French Republic.

**Naturalism and Collaboration** The writer Gustave Flaubert had been a childhood friend of Maupassant's mother and served as a friend and mentor to the author during his young adulthood, introducing him to other writers. "Boule de Suif" ("Ball of Tallow"), which was Maupassant's first published story, was part of a collaborative effort, *Les soirees de Medan* (1880), which included the work of several young French naturalists under the influence and direction of Émile Zola. The story was the

first of many war stories and the one that made Maupassant an overnight celebrity. A tale of hypocrisy and betrayal, it was a stinging criticism of Rouen's "respectable" society, which made France's defeat by the Prussians inevitable. Maupassant later broke with the naturalist school, turning instead to realism. The latter set of principles, as elaborated by Flaubert, called for a close attention to form and a dedication to precision of detail and exact description.

**A Publishing Whirlwind** Maupassant spent several years on the staffs of two Parisian newspapers, often working under pseudonyms. From 1880 to 1890 he published nearly three hundred short stories and six novels, an astounding literary feat, by constantly reshaping and reworking existing stories and duplicating scenes, descriptions, and short scenes from his newspaper pieces. In 1881, *La Maison Tellier* (*Madame Tellier's Establishment*), Maupassant's first collection of stories, was published. Approximately half of the stories had appeared in print previously, and critical reaction was somewhat mixed, but sales were spectacular.

The years 1883 to 1885 were especially productive for Maupassant. Four additional collections of stories appeared: *Clair de Lune* (*Moonlight*, 1883); *Miss Harriet* (1884); *Les Soeurs Rondoli* (*The Rondoli Sisters*, 1884); and *Yvette* (1884). He also published *An soleil* (1884; translated as *African Wanderings*, 1903), his first travel journal. Several of the stories in *Clair de Lune* treat the subject of madness, for Maupassant's first serious doubts about his own sanity date from this period.

In 1885 his collection titled *Contes du jour et de la nuit* (*Day and Night Stories*) was published. "La Parure" ("The Diamond Necklace"), one of Maupassant's best-known tales, is featured in this collection. The twist ending, later exploited by O. Henry, was in fact not typical of Maupassant's stories. Three more story collections next appeared, *Monsieur Parent* (1885), *Toine* (1886), and *La Petite Roque* (1886).

**Personal Potshots and Glimpses of Madness** His novel *Bel-Ami* (1885; translated 1891) is a biting satire of Parisian society in general, and of the journalistic milieu in particular. Greeted with anger by those who felt personally targeted, *Bel-Ami* was nevertheless reviewed favorably by most critics and was another commercial success.

The definitive version of his most famous fantastic tale, "Le Horla" ("The Horla," 1887) recounts the plight of a passive victim, an unwilling host to an invisible parasite that is slowly sapping his power and his life. Again Maupassant addresses themes of madness that would prove eerily prophetic for his own life.

*Pierre et Jean*, Maupassant's shortest novel and considered by most critics to be his best, was published in January of 1888. The subject of this psychological novel is the intense mental suffering of Pierre Roland, who begins to doubt the paternal legitimacy of his brother and is eventually excluded from the family circle. Maupassant's fourth novel was on the whole very well received by his contemporaries, and also met with great popular success.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Maupassant's famous contemporaries include:

**Alexandre Dumas, fils** (1824–1895): A French playwright, and son of Alexandre Dumas, père (author of *The Three Musketeers*); his dramatic career surpassed his father's, and he was the dominant French dramatist in the later 1800s.

**Cesar Ritz** (1850–1918): The Swiss hotel manager who founded the Ritz hotel chain.

**Edward Smith** (1850–1912): The British captain of the steamship *Titanic* when it sank after hitting an iceberg; roughly fifteen hundred people died as a result, including Smith.

**Pytor Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893): A Russian composer who brought intense emotion into his music; best known today for his music composed for the ballet *The Nutcracker*.

**Ivan Turgenev** (1818–1883): A Russian novelist, best known for *Fathers and Sons* (1862), which illustrates the divide between generations.

**All This Useless Beauty** Maupassant's last two novels, *Fort comme la mort* (1889; translated as *Strong as Death*, 1899) and *Notre cour* (1890; translated as *The Human Heart*, 1890), differ from previous works not only in the milieu they describe—that of the indolent rich—but also in the increasingly active role played by women, who cause untold suffering in their male admirers.

*L'Inutile Beauté* (1890) is a collection of stories that first appeared in 1889 or 1890. The "useless beauty" of the story's title is a countess who, after bearing seven children in eleven years for her possessive husband, throws off the mantle of repeated pregnancies. She plants a seed of doubt in her husband's head by suggesting that one of her children is not his, thereby destroying his confidence and peace of mind for six years, until she reveals that she has lied. Exasperated at first, her husband suddenly sees her in a new light, as an ideal woman.

These novels were to be Maupassant's last. He had contracted the sexually transmitted disease syphilis as a young man, and it was now killing him. The disease, which was incurable at that time—indeed, it was a rather common ailment, though a debilitating one—had led to recurrent problems with his eyesight and now brought Maupassant to a complete physical and mental breakdown. He attempted suicide in 1892 and was subsequently confined to an asylum in Paris. He died on July 6, 1893, at the age of forty-two, a victim of third-stage syphilis.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Social order and class consciousness are key themes in Guy de Maupassant's work, and are common throughout literature. Here are some examples of works treating these themes:

- "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), a poem by Thomas Gray. This poem mourns the common people, and meditates that all people, no matter their wealth or social standing, are equals after death.
- Madame Bovary* (1857), a novel by Gustave Flaubert. In this novel, Emma Bovary struggles in vain to find happiness through romantic love and wealth.
- "The Stationmaster" (1830), a short story by Alexander Pushkin. This short story by the noted Russian poet and writer chronicles the tragic tale of a humble stationmaster and his beautiful runaway daughter.
- A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), a novel by Charles Dickens. This novel follows life in Paris during the French Revolution, which resulted in the overthrow of the nobility, and questions how to best achieve social changes.
- "Vengeful Creditor" (1971), a short story by Chinua Achebe. In this short story, a well-off African family falsely promises a girl she will eventually be able to go to school if she takes care of their child.

### Works in Literary Context

Gustave Flaubert's role in establishing Maupassant's career was substantial. Besides offering encouragement to his young friend and intervening on his behalf in securing publishers for his early work, Flaubert shared with him his own philosophy of letters, insisting on the necessity of finding *le mot juste* (the precise word) to describe each concept and thing, as well as on the importance of accurate observation. Flaubert further aided the apprentice Maupassant by introducing him into literary circles that included not only Émile Zola but also Ivan Turgenev, Alphonse Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt, and Paul Bourget. Maupassant was truly at the center of European thought, and his work bears its stamp.

**Class Consciousness and the Maintenance of Status** Many of Maupassant's stories deal with the drama created by social class issues. In his short story "The Diamond Necklace," for example, the main character is a middle-class woman who aspires to a higher social status. She borrows a diamond necklace from a wealthy friend to wear to a fancy party, and when she loses it, she and her husband go heavily into debt in order to replace the necklace without the friend finding out. After many years of scrimping and hard work to pay off the debt, the woman discovers that the necklace she borrowed and lost

was actually fake, and hardly worth anything. In his novel *Pierre et Jean*, a son doubts that his brother is actually the child of their deceased father, a potential scandal among their upper-class acquaintances. Rather than reveal the truth, the family hides the secret and shuns the legitimate son in order to maintain their social standing.

Maupassant's short fiction in particular has been compared to that of Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Edgar Allan Poe, and Henry James. The authors outside of France whom he influenced include Rudyard Kipling, August Strindberg, Joseph Conrad, William Sydney Porter (O. Henry), Somerset Maugham, William Saroyan, and Gabriele D'Annunzio. Although various labels have been affixed to him ("realist," "naturalist"), he steadfastly refused identification with any literary movement throughout his life.

### Works in Critical Context

Both during his lifetime and throughout the twentieth century, writers and critics alike have praised Maupassant's writing. His stories are seen as masterpieces of economy and clarity, classical in their formal simplicity, uncommonly varied in their themes, and keenly evocative in their descriptions. His originality was believed to lie not in his subjects but in his style.

Maupassant's critical reception has focused on several major areas, among them his morality, the nature of his realism, Flaubert's influence on his work, and the autobiographical aspects of his fiction. The inherent sexuality of Maupassant's work was questioned as early as 1880, when his poem "Au bord de l'eau" shocked and offended bourgeois sensibilities, sparking threats of a lawsuit. Henry James, one of Maupassant's most perceptive commentators, called Maupassant a "lion in the path" of moralistic nineteenth-century critics because of the frankly erotic element in his work. A central concern of critics during his own time, Maupassant's sensuality continues to be remarked upon by such modern critics as Martin Turnell, who find his emphasis on sexuality evidence of his limited artistic vision.

**Realism, Purity, Lesbianization?** Maupassant's realism has also provided a focal point for critics. Early commentators were often appalled at what they saw as his lack of compassion for his characters. Later critics have dismissed this contention in favor of commentary on the technical virtuosity of Maupassant's prose, praising the purity of his narrative style, the use of the revelatory detail, and the absence of authorial commentary so much in vogue among novelists of his era. And still more recently, critics like Terry Castle have read Maupassant through the lens of queer theory, arguing that he enacts a "lesbianization" of those scenes and locales... typically associated with French impressionist painting. We seem here to look into a [Édouard] Manet or [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir canvas in which the men, paradoxically, are really women and the women who love them know it."

## Responses to Literature

1. Maupassant “recycled” parts of his stories and current events. Many legal and crime dramas on television do the same thing. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using real events as the basis for fictional works? Do you think such works should be considered less important because they borrow from real life? Why or why not?
2. Maupassant died as a result of syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease that was considered shameful among the well-heeled in European society. Using your library or the Internet, research popular opinion of Maupassant at the time of his death and in the years following. Is there evidence that his unfortunate end affected critical and popular reception of his work? Do you think such an affliction would affect a celebrity’s status in modern times?
3. Using your library’s resources and the Internet, research the difference between the naturalist and realist schools of writing, promoted by Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert respectively. Write an essay comparing and contrasting their approaches. Where does Maupassant’s work seem to fit?

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## Vladimir Mayakovsky

BORN: 1893, Bagdadi, Georgia

DIED: 1930, Moscow, Russia

NATIONALITY: Russian

GENRE: Poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Cloud in Trousers* (1915)

*War and the World* (1917)

*Revolution: A Poet’s Chronicle* (1917)

*Man* (1918)

*Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1925)

### Overview

Vladimir Mayakovsky is considered the central figure of the Russian Futurist movement and the premier artistic voice of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The Russian Futurists saw their work as the leading mode of aesthetic expression for their time—a period distinguished by violent social upheaval and the subsequent downfall of Russia’s established government. Mayakovsky is generally thought of as one of the most innovative poets in twentieth-century literature.



Vladimir Mayakovski Mayakovski, Vladimir, photograph. *The Literary Gazette*.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood in Bagdadi** Vladimir Mayakovsky was born the youngest of three children on July 7, 1893, in the western Georgian village of Bagdadi to Russian parents—Vladimir Konstantinovich Mayakovsky and Aleksandra Alekseevna Maiakovskaia. His father was a forest ranger, an official of the Russian government whose work took him to the Caucasus Mountains. Young Mayakovsky would occasionally accompany him on these trips. He spent the rest of his childhood playing in and around Bagdadi, where he picked up Georgian, the only foreign language he ever mastered.

**The Social Democratic Worker's Party and Prison** After the death of his father in 1906, Mayakovsky's mother moved the family to Moscow. There he attended public secondary school. He was an intellectually precocious child who developed an early appreciation for literature, but he demonstrated little interest in schoolwork. In 1908 he joined the Social Democratic Worker's Party, a subversive, anti-czarist organization. At this time, Russia was under the control of Nicholas II, the last czar in the country's history. During his reign, peaceful protesters who aimed to present a petition to Nicholas II, were gunned down by the secret police in an event that ultimately undermined the power of the czarist regime, Bloody Sunday. Between the ages of fifteen and sixteen, Mayakovsky was arrested three times by undercover police who had amassed evidence linking him with such criminal activities as running an illegal printing press, bank robbery, and organizing a jailbreak of political prisoners. He was imprisoned for six months after his third arrest in connection with the jailbreak charge, and proved such an agitating presence among other inmates that he was frequently moved and eventually placed in solitary confinement.

**Release from Prison and Performing Poetry** Upon his release from prison, he entered the Moscow Institute of Art, hoping to become a painter. There he met the Russian Cubist painter David Burlyuk, who introduced him to the innovative trends in the visual arts and poetry known as avant-garde. Dressed in outrageous garb, such as the yellow tunic that became his trademark, the tall and ruggedly handsome Mayakovsky soon became the dominant and most popular poet-performer of the group, frequently captivating audiences with his loud, dramatic recitations.

**First Drama Written and Performed** In 1913, he wrote and performed in his first drama, the "tragedy" *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, which played to full houses of curious and sometimes heckling spectators. Two years later Mayakovsky met Osip and Lilya Brik, beginning a relationship that greatly affected his personal and professional life: Osip Brik, a wealthy lawyer with strong literary

interests, became Mayakovsky's publisher, and Lilya—Osip's wife—became Mayakovsky's mistress and the inspiration for most of his impassioned love poetry, including *The Backbone Flute* (1916) and *About That* (1923).

**Poet of the Revolution** The outbreak of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, which overthrew the czarist regime and gave power to the Soviets, provided Mayakovsky with an opportunity to combine his political commitment and artistic talents, and he plunged headlong into the cause of promoting the new regime. Victor Shklovsky, a leading Russian critic, wrote in his memoirs, "Mayakovsky entered the revolution as he would enter his own home." Soon considered the official poet of the Revolution, he applied his poetic skill toward writing songs, slogans, and jingles expounding Bolshevik ideology, and also used his abilities as a painter and illustrator to produce a voluminous number of propaganda posters and cartoons. He was proud of his ability to create utilitarian literature without compromising himself as a poet, and critics also marvel at his achievement, often citing his three-thousand-line poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*—written on the leader's death in 1924—as one of his finest works, a communist equivalent of a religious epic.

**Soviet Representative** In the mid- to late 1920s, he traveled in Europe, Mexico, and the United States as an official representative of the Soviet government. On these trips abroad he kept a grueling schedule of public appearances and recorded his impressions of the capitalist societies he visited. He expressed his admiration of American technology and architecture in his *America* cycle (1925), which includes one of his most famous poems, "Brooklyn Bridge," a eulogy to American engineering and the universal plight of the common laborer.

**Strained Relations** During the last few years of his life, Mayakovsky experienced a succession of personal disappointments and critical attacks from Soviet officials, all of which eroded his confidence and stamina. He had been growing increasingly disillusioned by the expanding party bureaucracy and the infiltration of bourgeois values into the new order. At the same time, conservative Bolshevik leaders charged that Mayakovsky's writing was too individualistic. Joseph Stalin's Five Year Plan advocated collectivization of agriculture and art alike; and the Bolshevik leaders claimed that Mayakovsky's prerevolutionary Futurist beliefs were incompatible with their ideology. Under extreme political pressure, he was forced to abandon his editorship of *New LEF*, a revival of the Futurist magazine *LEF*, and joined the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), a conservative, state-controlled literary organization.

**Depression, Despair, and Suicide** The growing despair and ambivalence he felt toward his own life and the future of his nation is clearly reflected in his satires on the philistine Soviet bureaucrats—*The Bedbug* (1929) and

*The Bathhouse* (1930)—written and performed in the last two years of his life. Considered outrageous offenses to the state, the plays received scathing reviews and were banned in the Soviet Union until 1955. Although in the last months of his life Mayakovsky maintained his usual hectic public schedule, he was emotionally devastated, taking the critical rejection of his work as a personal attack. Torn between the flamboyant originality of his art and a desire to “stamp on the throat” of his talent in service to the party, he played Russian roulette, a pastime he favored when despondent, and died by his own hand on April 14, 1930.

## Works in Literary Context

**Influences on Voice and Revolutionary Themes** Mayakovsky was strongly influenced by his love affair with Lilya Brik, his extensive travels, and by war and revolution. His lyrical verses are often about love. Yet, his political poems, which show other influences, cover a great range: He wrote a long, high-styled tribute to Lenin, funny political satire, and political pamphlets. He wrote children’s poems with political subtexts, occasional poems for events such as the building of a canal, and political poems meant to influence—not commemorate—political decisions. His love poems and even his advertisements showed political concern. *About That* (1923) is as much about politics as it is about love; one advertisement for rubber galoshes shows a hammer and sickle on the tread of a galosh.

**Voicing Historical Misfortunes and Controversies** As the so-called Poet of the Revolution, Mayakovsky voiced the misfortunes and controversies of twentieth-century Russian history. With his poems reading as exciting displays of verbal mastery, he strove to invent a voice that was truly revolutionary. Most notable is this voice of the poet persona, or speaker, he developed to issue forth his themes. In his politically oriented verse one role the persona takes on is that of a self-sacrificing savior who lays down his life for the Revolution. Another role the speaker frequently takes is that of a social critic and prophet of the Revolution. In *A Cloud in Trousers* (1915), for instance, this poet persona severely chastises the bourgeoisie (capitalist class) for their complacency regarding the impending destruction of their world. This speaker democratically equates himself with the “street thousands—students, prostitutes, contractors” in a manner reminiscent of Walt Whitman, whose poetry Mayakovsky had read in translation.

**The Futurist Style** The Futurist poets aimed to destroy traditional poetic modes. They did this through disregard for convention, use of bizarre imagery and invented vocabulary, and techniques borrowed from avant-garde painting, including irregular typefaces, offbeat illustrations, and the author’s handwriting. Mayakovsky virtually abandoned metric structure in his poetry. On

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mayakovsky’s famous contemporaries include:

**Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971): Russian composer famous for his orchestral work for ballets, most notably *Rite of Spring* and *The Firebird*.

**David Burlyuk** (1882–1967): Ukrainian artist closely associated with Russian Futurism who was an acquaintance of and early influence on Mayakovsky.

**Boris Pasternak** (1890–1960): Nobel Prize-winning Russian novelist famous for his epic *Doctor Zhivago*.

**Joseph Stalin** (1878–1953): Communist leader of the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1953, Stalin was infamous for his dictatorial rule and his ordered executions of perhaps millions of dissenters.

the page his verse is arranged in irregular lines—often in a step formation such as that found in the work of the modern American poet William Carlos Williams—and is generally held together by strong, but unpredictable, internal rhyme schemes. Much of his originality as a poet is attributed to his use of hyperbolic (exaggerated) imagery, often blasphemous or violent.

Individually he had no Russian poet followers to speak of, and his particular poetic style was never further developed. In Lithuania, however, Mayakovsky as a Futurist poet was considered to inform the formation of The Four Winds movement—which took its first influences from his Futurism.

## Works in Critical Context

Whether Mayakovsky intended it or not, there were a few critical misconceptions about his work. To this day discussions about him still degenerate quickly to old pro- and anti-Communist positions that dominated the critical approaches to him and his work during the Cold War. Yet it is notable that a new image of the poet has begun to emerge, especially in scholarship published after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

That he excelled at studies in literature as early as the age of nine is also generally overlooked by critics, as they tend to interpret him as a populist illiterate. Further contributing to this critical misconception of the poet is the fact that Mayakovsky intentionally wrote as if he could not write. He disregarded academic verse structure. The dominant elements in his verse reveal a tendency for what is oral and a preference for emphasis on the sound of poetry. As Russian critic D. S. Mirsky describes it, “Mayakovsky’s poetry is very loud, very unrefined, and stands absolutely outside the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ taste.” It is marked by powerful rhythm, often

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who have also focused on themes of unrequited love or revolution, or both:

*The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (2004), a novel by Victor Serge. This book about the Stalinist purge is also a mystery, a thriller, and a tale of great courage and nobility.

*Darkness at Noon* (1940), a novel by Arthur Koestler. In this story, the protagonist is a retired Bolshevik and revolutionary who is imprisoned, tortured, and tried for treason.

*In the Casa Azul: A Novel of Revolution and Betrayal* (2003), a novel by Meaghan Delahunt. In this historically based novel, the author explores both revolution and love in the worlds of Frida Kahlo and Leon Trotsky.

*Man's Fate* (1933), a novel by André Malraux. In this fictionalized account of the Chinese Revolution, the author explores the inner workings of the minds of such characters as Ch'en Ta Erh, a terrorist-assassin with a conscience.

evocative of an invigorating march cadence, which came naturally to Mayakovsky, who would loudly declare his verses in his booming velvety voice—by all accounts beautiful to hear. This dominant oral element managed to fool critics of Mayakovsky into treating him as a genuine illiterate, even though memoirs of him are full with accounts of his lying in bed reading or eagerly talking about something he had recently read.

### Responses to Literature

1. Mayakovsky was the so-called Poet of the Revolution. Research the Russian Revolution of 1917. How did it affect Russian civilians? How is this impact reflected in the poet's work?
2. Russian revolutionary Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had a profound influence on Mayakovsky, who even wrote a tribute song called a "paean" for his leader. Study a brief biography of Lenin. Then look up the definition and study the components of a paean. In group discussion, decide how important Lenin was to Mayakovsky. What in the paean *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* suggests the poet's attitude and feelings?
3. Those interested in the Russian Revolution should read *Ten Days That Shook the World* (1919), a first-hand account of the October Revolution of 1917 as experienced by American journalist John Reed. Lenin himself read the book and wrote a glowing introduction to the 1922 edition.

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## John McCrae

BORN: 1872, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

DIED: 1918, Boulogne-sur-Mer, France

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

"In Flanders Fields" (1915)

### Overview

Known to his friends and colleagues as a physician and a soldier, John McCrae is best known for his war memorial poem "In Flanders Fields," perhaps the most popular and best remembered verse of World War I.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Reader and a Cadet** John McCrae was born on November 30, 1872, in Guelph, Ontario, Canada to woolen manufacturer David McCrae and Janet Eckford



John McCrae The Granger Collection, New York. Reproduced by permission.

McCrae. As a child, John developed a love of reading from his mother and later a passion for soldiering from his father.

In 1873, the family moved from the small cottage to a larger home on Woolwich Street. The young McCrae began his schooling at Central Public School before moving on to Guelph Collegiate Institute. At Guelph Collegiate the fourteen-year-old McCrae joined the school's affiliated Highland Cadet Corps. A year later he joined the local militia regiment of artillery commanded by his father, serving as the regiment's bugler.

**Medical Training** In 1894, McCrae graduated with a degree in biology from the University of Toronto and began medical studies at the university. In the summers of 1896 and 1897, he completed his internship at the convalescent home for children, the Robert Garrett Hospital in Mount Airy, Maryland. There he began writing, publishing his first article, "The Comedy of a Hospital," in the Presbyterian weekly, *The Westminster*. His first poems were also published during this time, some of which appeared in the student paper *Varsity* and in commercial publications, such as *Saturday Night* and *Godey's*. The theme of most of his poems is death, usually described as a welcome rest after the toils of life, often in images of reaping and harvest.

While at the university, McCrae joined The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada, a military regiment that eventually

promoted him to captain. When McCrae graduated from medical school with his M.D. in 1898, he practiced at the Toronto General Hospital and the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore before receiving an appointment as a fellow in pathology at McGill University and a pathologist at the Montreal General Hospital.

**Second Boer War** In 1900, McCrae took a temporary leave of his medical studies to soldier in the Second Boer War (also known as the South African War). Joining the Royal Canadian Artillery in December, he was made a lieutenant. His distinguished performance was recorded and his letters home were published in the Guelph *Evening Mercury*. McCrae's experiences in South Africa added the theme of war to his poetry. Nearly all his poems written after his return to Canada were published in McGill's *University Magazine*.

**Reputed Pathologist** Upon his return to Montréal in 1901, McCrae began his appointed residency at Montréal General Hospital and soon established himself as a fine pathologist. In September of 1902, he was awarded his license to practice by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of the Province of Quebec and became assistant pathologist to the Royal Victoria Hospital Montréal, yet proceeded to practice clinical work instead. As a lecturer in medicine at his alma mater McGill University, which he began in 1909, McCrae joined forces with his former professor and mentor J. G. Adami to write *A Text-Book of Pathology for Students of Medicine* (1912).

**World War I and Flanders Field** In 1914 the United Kingdom declared war on Germany. As a dominion of the UK, McCrae's Canada was part of the declaration. Using his influence with a former Boer War compatriot, Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Whipple Bancroft Morrison, McCrae ensured his appointment as head field surgeon and major in charge of the First Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. His brigade was moved to Belgium in April 1915; it was during the Second Battle of Ypres when in May 1915 McCrae's friend and former student, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed—inspiring McCrae's famous poem, "In Flanders Fields" (1915).

**Final Service** The next month McCrae left the artillery brigade. He advanced to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, assigned a post as head of medicine at No. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Dannes-Camiers near Boulogne-sur-Mer, France. Prescott recounts the reactions of the staff of former McGill University colleagues as McCrae arrived, appearing gaunt, exhausted, and emotionally changed as if "an icon had been broken." McCrae nevertheless continued to insist on the highest possible standards of service. Among his best practices, he insisted on living as his comrades lived—in tents at the front instead of in a heated shelter assigned to military heads.

The poor conditions and frigid weather lowered McCrae's resistance to illness, and though he had been

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

McCrae's famous contemporaries include:

**Sir Winston Churchill** (1874–1965): Twice prime minister of the United Kingdom, this statesman and acclaimed orator was also a Nobel Prize-winning author.

**Marchese Guglielmo Marconi** (1874–1937): Pioneer of the radiotelegraph system, he shared a Nobel Prize in Physics (with Ferdinand Braun) in 1909.

**W. Somerset Maugham** (1874–1965): A prolific author, he was adept at storytelling through his popular novels, stories, and plays.

**Charles Talbut Onions** (1873–1965): English grammarian and lexicographer, he is best known for his collaborative work on *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).

**Marcel Proust** (1871–1922): Profound and prolific essayist and novelist, he spent his life on one of the most revered works of the century: *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, or *Remembrance of Things Past*) (1913–1927).

forced by order to move to the warmer huts, he succumbed to meningitis and pneumonia. He died on January 28, 1918, four days after he was made consulting physician to the First British Army—the first Canadian to earn such an honorable distinction. He was buried with full military honors in the cemetery at Wimereux, France. According to the Guelph Civic Museum biographers, seventy-five nursing sisters attended McCrae's funeral; his horse Bonfire led the procession, and in military tradition, bore his master's boots backward in the stirrups.

### Works in Literary Context

**Influence of World War I** As biographer John F. Prescott notes, McCrae published some thirty poems throughout his life, many during his early twenties. Among these earlier poems were several influenced by the tragic death from infection of a girl with whom he was in love. Likewise, the death of friends and comrades in wartime impacted the physician-poet. McCrae's close friend Alexis Helmer was killed during the Boer War, as he stood near his dugout by the Yser Canal. After the men collected the parts of Helmer's body and rearranged them on an army blanket, they gathered for a service, with McCrae presiding and reciting "Order of Burial of the Dead." According to McCord Museum scholars, it is generally supposed that his dear friend's death prompted his writing "In Flanders Fields," dated by McCrae May 3, 1915.

**Pastoral Style** In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, critic and scholar Paul Fussell analyzes "In Flanders Fields" (1915) as a poem that carries the mood of pastoral poetry. From "pastor," "shepherd," this style is characterized as part of the world of the shepherds as they strolled or lay in the fields tending the flocks. Pastoral poetry was common in several centuries—popularized in the seventeenth century, for example, by poets such as Christopher Marlowe and Edmund Spenser and playwrights such as Ben Jonson. In McCrae's poem, Fussell suggests, "We have the red flowers of traditional pastoral elegy; the crosses which suggest the idea of Calvary and sacrifice; the sky as seen from a trench; the larks singing in the midst of the horrors and terrors of man's greatest folly; [and] the contrast between the song of the larks and the voice of the guns."

**Antiwar Sentiments** Because of his many experiences with death by disease or war, says Prescott, McCrae's early poems "often had death or the search for oblivion and peace after death as their theme. Later poems tended either to be religious, inspired by the plight of his patients, or to deal with war." As McCord Museum notes also indicate, although McCrae returned from the Boer War without physical injury, "he began to disapprove of the cost of war in human and animal lives."

By the time he participated as a medical rescue soldier in World War I, McCrae was developing the theme of the consequences of war. He employed a common literary device, the voice of the dead. In "In Flanders Fields," for example, the dead speakers, along with the many pieces of imagery, work on a number of levels to present the manifold themes of war—including, as Fussell suggests, the idea of the soldiers as lovers, with a sharp contrast drawn between beds and graves.

### Works in Critical Context

McCrae's small body of work has earned an unusual kind of critical reception. Most impacting on the larger culture is his poem, "In Flanders Field," published anonymously in *Punch* on December 8, 1915. It quickly became popular among the British troops and during World War I became "the poem of the army."

**"In Flanders Field"** In a short time "In Flanders Field" became a signature for the consequences of World War I. According to H. E. Harmon of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, "Perhaps nothing in all literature ever did so much to fire the soul of the western world to the cause of liberty." Told from the point of view of those who died in the conflict, the poem bore a symbol that became adopted by the veterans for November 11, Veteran's Day. The first lines read, "In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row." According to the scholar Robert Giddings, these poppies were made into paper handouts by the veterans and have been "sold" (or given to solicit donations) for the last six decades to raise funds for the war-disabled. However,

not all critics agree with popular sentiment regarding the work; Paul Fussell, for example, points out that the poem's fatal flaw is the "recruiting-poster rhetoric" found in its final third.

## Responses to Literature

1. Both the Boer War and World War I influenced McCrae's poetry. To understand the impact the war had on the physician-poet, investigate the circumstances of each war, researching the causes and casualties. Discuss how McCrae's verses reflect his view of the war. Do you think most people feel the same way about war? Explain your answer using lines from the poems to support your position.
2. Biographer John F. Prescott writes that John McCrae "was a man of many talents, undergirded by the highest standards of loyalty, service, and duty." Visit the McCord Museum Web site and take the John McCrae Web Tour. Discuss what key individuals, events, and experiences contributed to McCrae's passion for medicine as well as his success as a poet.
3. Professor Harry Rusche of the Department of English at Emory University has collected the poetry and biographies of six "Lost Poets of the Great War." Among the six is John McCrae. Visit the Web site and read one poem by each poet—Rupert Brooke, McCrae, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Alan Seeger, and Edward Thomas. Compare the tones: What is the attitude of each poet toward war? What words or lines suggest such an attitude? What do the six poets have in common?

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who also offered descriptions of the impact of war:

- "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (1945), a poem by Randall Jarrell. In this poem of five lines, the speaker describes the activity and death of the soldier who works in the belly of the World War II fighter plane.
- "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920), a poem by Wilfred Owen. This poem, taken from a Latin line by Horace ("It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country"), is written from the point of view of a World War I soldier.
- "Facing It" (1988), a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa. In this poem, the speaker stands facing the Vietnam War Memorial, a black wall that holds the names of 58,195 Americans taken by the war.
- "The Things They Carried" (1990), a short story by Tim O'Brien. In a story from the book by the same title, the narrator describes the literal and figurative weights the Vietnam soldiers carried.
- "Welcome to Hiroshima" (1984), a poem by Mary Jo Salter. In this piece, the speaker visits the site of the first atomic bombing, recounting in great detail the fallout.

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## Ian McEwan

- BORN: 1948, Aldershot, England
- NATIONALITY: British
- GENRE: Fiction, screenplays
- MAJOR WORKS:
- First Love, Last Rites* (1975)
- The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)
- Amsterdam* (1998)

*Atonement* (2001)  
*Saturday* (2005)  
*On Chesil Beach* (2007)

## Overview

Ian McEwan, a contemporary British novelist and screenwriter, is widely recognized for the daring originality of his fiction, much of which delineates bizarre sexuality and shocking violence. Frequently centering on deviant anti-heroes, his works explore conflicts between norms and socially unacceptable drives of the unconscious.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood Abroad** Ian Russell McEwan was born on June 21, 1948, in Aldershot, England, to David McEwan and Rose Lilian Violet Moore McEwan. His father was a sergeant major in the British army. McEwan's childhood was spent in the tracks of his father's assignments to empire outposts such as Singapore and Libya until the age of twelve, when he was sent to boarding school in England for five years. It was there that he became interested in English Romantic poetry and modern American and English fiction.

**New British University Graduate** McEwan entered the University of Sussex in Brighton in 1967 and earned a BA with honors in English in 1970. He then enrolled in the MA program in English at the University of East Anglia, where he was permitted to submit some of his short fiction as part of the requirements for his degree. Under the tutelage of novelist Malcolm Bradbury, McEwan wrote more than two dozen short stories and earned his degree in 1971.



Ian McEwan David Levenson / Getty Images

McEwan is very much a product of the new British universities, popularly known as "plate-glass universities" as opposed to the older "red-brick universities" at which his contemporaries, such as Kingsley Amis or Philip Larkin, have taught or still work. Built during the 1960s, the new universities set out to revolutionize curricula and the general structure of academic life in Great Britain. To a significant extent they succeeded, and their graduates, such as McEwan, have made a distinctive impact on the cultural life of the United Kingdom.

After a brief foray traveling in Afghanistan after earning his master's degree, McEwan returned to England and focused on publishing and his writing career. The country he returned to faced numerous challenges in the 1970s. The British Empire had disappeared in the post-World War II period, leaving Britain only with a handful of dependencies with mostly tiny populations and few economic resources. A Labour government replaced the Conservative one in 1974, though the change did little to stem the rapid inflation, labor disputes, and protracted conflict in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants that marked the decade.

**From Short-Story Writer to Novelist** Three short stories written for his master's thesis were included in McEwan's initial collection, *First Love, Last Rites* (1975), which won the Somerset Maugham Award and established McEwan as one of England's most promising young writers. However, many critics expressed discomfort with his portrayal of childhood innocence warped by such anomalies as incest and forced transvestism. Three years later the second collection, *In Between the Sheets* (1978), appeared. In the same year McEwan published his first novel, *The Cement Garden* (1978). Its concerns—incest, murder (or at least murderousness), infantilism, and gender confusion—had all been foreshadowed in his stories.

**Success as Novelist** The publication of the novel essentially marked the end of McEwan's career as a writer of short fiction. He has written in a variety of genres since then, including novels, plays, an oratorio, and motion-picture and television scripts, but he has published only a handful of short-fiction works. Critical acclaim for McEwan's novels began building with the first of four novels to be nominated for a prestigious Booker Prize, *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). Set in Venice, Italy, less for its romantic or historic properties than as a place of menace and distortion, it tells about an English couple on holiday. One night they lose their way and fall in with a local man who eventually involves them in his own life and eventually a murder.

**New Territories** In the mid-1980s McEwan's fiction moved into new territory. While traces of his interest in violence and abnormal psychological states remain, these subsequent works express much greater interest in broader questions of politics and history. With each

subsequent novel, too, McEwan's narrators have become more readily understandable and sympathetic characters. They are often artists or writers, in relationships with spouses and children, and they pay attention to world history and politics in ways that the narrators and main characters from the short-story collections do not.

In a 1987 interview with Amanda Smith in *Publishers Weekly*, McEwan noted that his 1982 marriage to Penny Allen, by which he acquired two stepdaughters, and the subsequent births of his two sons were at least partially responsible for this shift in focus.

**Important Later Novels** Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, McEwan continued to publish challenging novels. With *Black Dogs* (1992), the author reflects on the aftermath of the Nazi regime in Europe. The Nazi party ruled Germany in the 1930s, and their aggressive territorial ambitions were a direct cause of World War II. Included in the novel was the fall of the Berlin Wall, a significant milestone in the end of Communist domination of Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. *Amsterdam* (1998) describes the moral dilemma brought about by a lingering mental illness. *Atonement* (2001), regarded as one of McEwan's best works, is a story told from the point of view of an impressionable young narrator clearly identified as imaginative and inclined to interpret events to suit her penchant for drama. *Saturday* (2005) is set in the context of the growing opposition to the Iraq invasion. *On Chesil Beach* (2007) is a story of sexual awakening, as a couple undergoes a difficult but fruitful transition from innocence to familiarity.

Since the early 1980s, McEwan also has increasingly explored forms of writing other than those of the short story and the novel. He has written television plays, movie scripts (both original and adapted from the fiction of others), children's literature, and the words for an oratorio. He is regarded as one of the most versatile English authors of his generation.

### Works in Literary Context

Influenced by his interest in contemporary American and British fiction as well as Romantic poetry, McEwan is recognized for the originality of his fiction, much of which features bizarre sexuality and shocking violence.

**Unconventional Stories** McEwan's first novel, *The Cement Garden*, exposes a distorted adolescent world. This work examines the deteriorating relationships among four children who are left alone after both parents die. It opens with the death of their father. Attempting to cover the family garden with concrete because he is too ill to tend it, the father suffers a heart attack and collapses in the wet cement. The narrator, a homely adolescent named Jack, maintains a detached voice that casts a numbness over horrifying events.

McEwan's second short-story collection, *In Between the Sheets*, flows from realism to fantasy, horror to comedy. Magical realism permeates the stories, which fre-

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

McEwan's famous contemporaries include:

**Margaret Atwood** (1939–): Canadian Atwood is a novelist, poet, and short-story writer whose talents lie in exploring the relationship between humanity and nature and scrutinizing power as it pertains to gender and political roles. Her novels include *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

**Julian Barnes** (1946–): British author Barnes writes novels and publishes crime fiction under the name Dan Kavanagh. His novels include *Talking It Over* (1991).

**Anne Rice** (1941–): American author Rice is famous for her novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1973). In her work, she blends accurate historical elements with such themes as alienation and the individual's search for identity.

**Alice Walker** (1944–): African American writer Walker first gained success with her novel *The Color Purple* (1983).

**Martin Amis** (1949–): British author Amis is a prominent contemporary novelist and son of novelist Kingsley Amis. Martin Amis is lauded for his satirical view of the excesses of youth and contemporary society. His works include *Night Train* (1997).

**Jim Carroll** (1950–): American author Carroll is best known for his autobiographical work *The Basketball Diaries* (1978), which was made into a film in 1995.

quently portray peculiar sexual relationships. Thus, destructive sexuality is also a prominent theme. For example, "Reflections of a Kept Ape" is narrated by an ape who contemplates his waning relationship with his owner, a struggling female novelist. "Dead as They Come" portrays a wealthy, egotistical man who becomes obsessed with a mannequin and then destroys her when he believes she has been unfaithful.

**Post-War Settings** Many of McEwan's later novels share a similar setting—the post-World War II era, often continental Europe—and feature stories that are multi-layered. The theme of loss is also a hallmark of these books. *Black Dogs*, for example, explores the crumbling marriage of a couple against the fall out from Nazi rule on Europe. Their marriage falls apart after they encounter a pair of feral dogs which symbolize both the evil that humans, like the Nazis, are capable of as well as the extraordinary acts that people can accomplish when confronting such evil. While *Amsterdam* has a more contemporary setting, McEwan uses the death of Molly Lane to drive the plot and explore euthanasia issues in Great Britain. Her two oldest friends—a composer and a

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

McEwan predominantly focuses on adolescent characters, depicting them as acutely alienated and prone to cruelty or degenerate behavior. Here are some other works that center around conflicted teens:

- The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), a novel by J. D. Salinger. This novel's main character, Holden Caulfield, is a well-known icon of teenage alienation and defiance.
- The Ice Storm* (1994), a novel by Rick Moody. This novel centers around two neighboring families and the difficulties both the adolescents and the parents have in dealing with the difficult issues of the early 1970s.
- Ham on Rye* (1982), a novel by Charles Bukowski. This semiautobiographical work chronicles the coming-of-age of a young man who lives in Los Angeles during the Great Depression.
- Lord of the Flies* (1954), a novel by William Golding. This story examines a group of schoolboys abandoned on a desert island during a global war and highlights the conflict between the forces of light and dark within the human soul.

newspaper editor—make a euthanasia pact at her funeral, and though the pair come to odds, their story ends in Holland where the procedure can be more easily arranged. *Atonement* begins before World War II is launched when a working class young man, Robbie Turner, is falsely accused of rape on the estate on which his family works. The accusation is a payback for a misunderstanding a young girl sees between the young man and her elder sister. Much of the novel concerns what happens to the characters during World War II, as the young lovers lose each other, and the young girl suffers the loss of respect for herself and from her sister. Robbie goes to prison, but is allowed to serve during the war, bringing the conflict and all the death and destruction to the forefront.

### Works in Critical Context

McEwan first came to public notice in 1975, and was immediately recognized as an important new voice on the fiction scene. Having at first achieved fame, or even notoriety, because of the edgy nature of his subject matter, it has also polarized the critical assessment of his work. While some critics have maintained that McEwan is a serious literary writer who addresses challenging issues in his work, others have asserted that he is merely a glorified horror writer who is solely concerned with producing gratuitously shocking prose. Despite these disagreements, McEwan has been consistently praised for his storytelling, characterizations, and adept handling of metaphor and symbol.

***The Child in Time*** Many critics consider *The Child in Time* the most complex of McEwan's works, as it presents a political, personal, and metaphysical exploration of childhood. Based on an actual event, *The Child in Time* describes the agony of a father whose daughter is kidnapped from a grocery store. Consumed by guilt and grief, he steadily loses touch with reality, believing he sees his lost daughter everywhere.

Many reviewers stressed the novel's theme of lost youth, pointing to a character named Charles Darke, a successful politician who regresses to his childhood and ultimately commits suicide. Roberta Smoodin stated of the novel, "A lost childhood, lost childhood hopes and dreams remain present in the seemingly mature adult, McEwan suggests, not only in memory but in a kind of time that spirals in upon itself, seems to be recapturable in some plausible intermingling of Einstein and Proust, quantum physics and magical realism."

Also emphasized by critics is how McEwan explores the idea of time, its passage, and how they affect the human condition. As Mike Brett wrote in the *English Review*, "McEwan's great skill here is to explore scientific theory in a way that illuminates the unforeseeable tragic potential in the mundane choices we make on an everyday basis."

### Responses to Literature

1. McEwan often features adolescent characters in extreme angst. In small groups, discuss McEwan's comment on adolescence. Stage a debate about your beliefs for the class.
2. McEwan's work first attracted public attention because it was unsettling and disturbing. Write a short review of his works commenting on his novels' shock value and literary merits.
3. Choose two scenes from McEwan's works and write an essay comparing and contrasting their events, styles, and themes.
4. After having read several of McEwan's stories, what kind of attitude do you think the author has toward the world? In your paper, support your argument with lines from his books.
5. Read *Atonement*, then view the highly acclaimed film adaptation, released in 2007. In an essay, compare and contrast the two versions of the story. Does the filmmaker fully explore the novel's themes? What would you have done differently?

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## Menander

BORN: 342 BCE, Athens, Greece

DIED: 292 BCE, Piraeus, Greece

NATIONALITY: Greek

GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Anger* (321 BCE)

*The Grouch* (316 BCE)

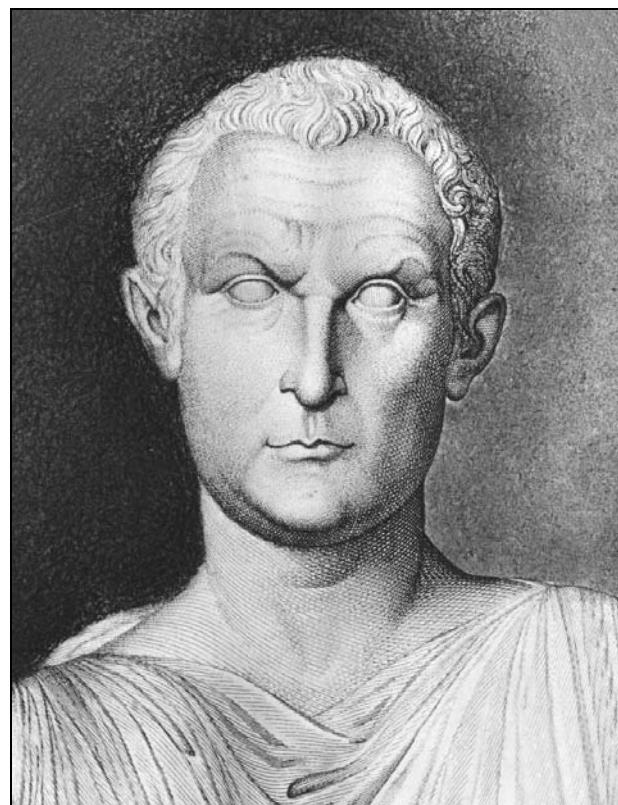
*The Arbitrants* (c. 304 BCE)

### Overview

Menander has been called the greatest representative of Greek New Comedy, the era of drama that followed the Old Comedy (c. 435–405 BCE) and the Middle Comedy (c. 400–323 BCE) in ancient Greece. He was praised in his lifetime for his use of everyday speech and realistic depiction of Athenian middle-class life, the exemplification of a relatively new comic voice. Menander's reworking of the stock characters and plots of Greek Middle Comedy and his emphasis on love and social intrigue greatly influenced the development of romantic comedy, or the comedy of manners.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Uncertain Biography** There is limited biographical information about Menander, though some facts are certain. Menander the Athenian, son of Diopeithes and Hegestrate, from the deme Kephisia, was born in 342–341 BCE and died in his early fifties. He wrote more than one hundred comedies in that time, beginning with a play called *Anger* in 321 BCE. *The Grouch*, his one play to survive virtually intact, won first prize at Athens in 316 BCE. By about 292–291 BCE, he was dead.



Menander Hulton Archive / Getty Images

During his lifetime, Menander witnessed Macedon's conquest of Greece in 338 BCE. Because Greeks were unable to unite politically, their territories were annexed by Philip II of Macedon. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, succeeded him. It is certain that Menander lived through the reign of Alexander the Great (336–323 BCE). Through Alexander's ambition for world empire and his admiration of Greek learning, Greek civilization was spread to all the lands conquered by Alexander. After Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his empire soon began to break up, a process Menander partially witnessed.

Other components of Menander's traditional biography are more dubious. Some are at least credible: that his plays reflect the influence of the older dramatist Alexis (whom some call his uncle); that he studied with the philosopher Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle (one of the greatest philosophers of the ancient world) as head of the *Peripatos* (the Peripatetic School); and that he had at least social connections with Demetrius of Phaleron, who headed an aristocratic (and pro-Macedonian) regime at Athens from 317 BCE to 307 BCE.

**The Legends Surrounding Menander's Life** Other more colorful details probably reflect the ancient practice of manufacturing biography from an author's work. Thus, it is told that Menander was prone to romantic infatuations (as are the youths of his plays), that he

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Menander's famous contemporaries include:

**Qu Yuan** (340 BCE–278 BCE): A patriotic Chinese poet active during the Warring States Period. His poems include "The Lament."

**Epicurus** (341 BCE–270 BCE): Greek philosopher who believed that the good life consisted of participating wholeheartedly in true friendships and enjoying excellent food. Two groups of quotes attributed to him are included in *Principal Doctrines*.

**Alexander the Great** (356 BCE–323 BCE): Macedonian king who conquered many lands from Greece to India.

**Seleucus I Nicator** (358 BCE–281 BCE): Having served under Alexander the Great, after the great leader's death, Seleucus I established the Seleucid Empire in the eastern portions of the lands Alexander conquered.

**Bryaxis** (c. 350 BCE–?): Greek sculptor commissioned by Artemisia II of Caria to work on a mausoleum dedicated to her brother's memory.

loved the courtesan Glykera (a name appearing in several comedies), and that he was effeminate (his style is refined). There is also a set of revealing (if unhistorical) anecdotes about him and some entertaining works of fiction, such as the correspondence of Menander and Glykera composed by the sophist (professional philosopher) Alciphron in the third century BCE. Such material tells one rather more about how Menander was read by later generations than about the life he actually led. As with most ancient authors, the material for any meaningful biographical criticism is lacking.

**Menander's Literary Output** Although little is known about the history of Menander himself, much more is known about his works. Literary historians believe that Menander composed 100 to 108 plays, 96 of which have been identified by title. Performances of his comedies continued well into Roman imperial times, and consequently some of his works were preserved indirectly through adaptations by the Roman dramatists Plautus and Terence. While copies of Menandrian texts were made as late as the fifth and sixth centuries, scholars believe that most of them were lost sometime between the seventh and ninth centuries. For over one thousand years, Menander was known only through references to and quotations from his works in ancient texts.

In 1905, the French archaeologist G. Lefebvre found significant fragments of his plays on Egyptian papyri. This landmark discovery recovered one-half of *The Arbitrants*, about two-fifths each of *The Shearing of Glycera* and *The Girl from Samos*, and less than a single scene from two

other plays. *The Dour Man*, discovered in 1957 in an Egyptian codex containing three of Menander's dramas, was first published in 1959. The first and last plays in the codex, four-fifths of *The Girl from Samos* and five-eighths of *The Shield*, were damaged and not published until 1969. More fragments of Menander's plays were discovered throughout the 1960s, including sections of *The Sikyonion*, *The Man She Hated*, and *The Double Deceiver*, and scholars project that more of his work may yet be found.

### Works in Literary Context

**Middle Comedy to New Comedy: Menander's Focus on Realism** Because of the limited biographical information about Menander, a discussion of influences on him is also necessarily incomplete. However, he was probably trained in dramatic composition and studied philosophy, and such education affected his writings. Menander also drew on his knowledge of speech and habits of the middle-class life of Athens as well as greater Greek culture of his time period.

In the course of the fourth century—the process is already discernible in later plays of Aristophanes such as *The Congresswomen* (392 BCE) and *Wealth* (388 BCE)—comedy began moving from the raucous, exuberant, and often political style of what came to be called Old Comedy to a more sedate, bourgeois drama of family relationships and erotic entanglements. Style and form changed accordingly. Whereas fifth-century plays are deliberately fantastic and illogical, fourth-century plots are comparatively well made. Menander was at the forefront of this movement in drama.

**Importance of Storytelling** Storytelling is in fact a key ingredient of Menandrian comedy and was facilitated by the development of a true act structure that developed the plot from exposition to climax to denouement in five sections punctuated by unscripted (and apparently unrelated) choral performances. Papyri regularly mark these breaks with the laconic note "choral song" interrupting the column of text. Menander shapes his action around these act breaks with a skill of which the practitioners of the well-made play would approve, and he invariably resolves his dramatic problems in satisfying, often unexpected ways.

**Emphasis on Character** Though his happy endings are frequently the result of manipulation—lucky encounters, timely recognitions, and the like—the motivating force behind his plots comes from his carefully delineated and essentially realistic depictions of human character. Against a background of stock comic types such as cooks, doctors, and advisers full of familiar attitudes and even more familiar jokes, Menander develops serious and recognizable moral dilemmas for the parents and children, husbands and wives, and anxious careerists who are the focus of his interest. Their basically good intentions are nearly wrecked not by external circumstances, as they would have been in Middle Comedy, but by their own

failure to recognize the limits of their knowledge and by the natural weaknesses of their own characters.

The tradition apparently supplied each figure with a recognizable mask and costume and a name appropriate to the dramatic role, but Menander turns the central figures of each play into individuals who make credible and often poignant responses to the challenges they face. The real sense of closure in a Menandrian play, therefore, comes not from the external manipulation of its plot, but from the internal process by which characters face the limits of their capabilities and deal honestly with the absurdity of their pretensions.

**Menander's Realism** From antiquity onward, Menander has been much praised for his realism: the unaffected naturalness of his language, the likeness of his characters to real people, the true portrait he gives of life in fourth-century Athens. Menander's realism is not only the product of acute observation but of a refined art working in a traditional medium. His subjects, while less limited than one might believe after hearing Ovid's assertion that "there is no play of Menander's without love," are chosen and treated with a regard for the conventions of civilized high comedy.

Menander excluded from his plays a whole range of grave events and permanent misfortunes (such as murder and distressing illness) to which real human beings are unfortunately prone. He also refrains from indulging in realistic detail purely for realistic detail's sake; his plays are plays and not documentary records. One may judge his characters to be drawn with acute psychological insight, yet he is not, as a modern dramatist might be, concerned with exploring the inner depths of their personalities. His analysis of character is ethical rather than psychological, and it is striking in *The Grouch* where Knemon's major speech of self-revelation leaves the old man's emotions almost entirely to the audience's imagination.

**Legacy** Though some critics note the difficulty of assessing his influence in the absence of more knowledge of his writings, they agree that Menander represents the apex of ancient tradition of comedy. However, his emphasis on love and social intrigue are believed to have greatly influenced the development of romantic comedy, or the comedy of manners.

### Works in Critical Context

During his lifetime, Menander was less successful than his contemporary playwrights, but after his death, ancient critics recognized his value and praised his work. The Roman critic Quintilian called him the leading dramatist of New Comedy, and the Greek biographer Plutarch preferred his style to that of Aristophanes. Since the rediscovery of fragments of his work in 1905 and of an entire play in 1957, interest in Menander's role in the development of drama has grown.

***The Girl from Samos*** In the view of many commentators, *The Girl from Samos* is a pioneering work in New Comedy because of the author's genuine compassion for

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In the play *The Arbitrants*, Menander describes the problems that arise because of the discovery of a foundling child. A foundling is a child whose parents have abandoned it—in film and literature, the child is often anonymously left on a rich stranger's doorstep in the hopes that the child will have a better life than the parents could have offered. The foundling has remained an important figure in literature and film to this day. Here are a few more examples of literature and films that feature foundlings:

**Book of Exodus** (date and author unknown). In this book of the Bible, the Pharaoh in Egypt has ordered the death of all newborn Hebrew children. Unwilling to watch her son die, Moses' mother puts him into a basket and places the basket in the Nile River. He is ultimately plucked from there by a member of the royal family and raised as royalty.

***The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*** (1749), a novel by Henry Fielding. As the title of this novel indicates, the main character of this text is a foundling. Tom Jones's status as a foundling, in this case, causes serious social problems for him when he grows up, because he is unable to marry the girl he loves on account of the social conventions regarding the status of foundlings.

***Meet the Robinsons*** (2007), an animated film directed by Steve Anderson. Left on the doorstep of an orphanage as an infant, Lewis spends his early, precocious years trying to invent gadgets that will help him figure out who his mother is and how to find her.

his characters and his psychological insight into their moral dilemmas, which find expression in the greater realism of the play. With *The Girl from Samos*, critics also agree that Menander exploits the comic potential of the stock elements of New Comedy. Yet most have concluded that his greatest strength lies in his ability to operate within the confines of the New Comedy form while at the same time delving beneath the surface of its conventions in order to individualize character.

Some commentators have been most impressed by his poignant characterizations of Demeas and Moschion, which reveal their inner turmoil as they struggle to deal with the threats to their father-son relationship. By devoting great attention to the anguish of these characters in their respective monologues, these critics assert, Menander effectively shifts the focus of the play from the obstructed marriage of Moschion and Plangon to the estranged bond between Moschion and Demeas, thereby subordinating the conventional theme of romantic love.

Referring to the characterization of such relationships, Eric G. Turner wrote in his introduction to

*Menander*: “*The Girl from Samos; or, The In-Laws*,” “The relationships in this comedy ring true. It is indeed in the mutual relationships of characters in the enclosed world of each play that a just imitation of life can be claimed for Menander. The drama develops out of the interaction of the characters on each other.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Read Menander’s *The Grouch* and Aristophanes’ *The Birds*. Menander’s work has been described as more realistic in its portrayal of its characters than Aristophanes’ work. How do these plays support or contradict this assessment? In your response essay, cite examples from each play to support your argument.
2. Read *The Arbitrants* and watch the film *Meet the Robinsons*. These works come from vastly different cultures and times, but they each deal with foundling children. In a short essay, analyze the different ways these pieces describe the issues and problems associated with foundling children. Which gives you a clearer picture of the issues surrounding the life of a foundling?
3. Trying to create characters who appear realistic is a difficult task. Yet, critics have consistently applauded Menander’s realistic characters. Based on your readings of Menander, do you agree that his characters are realistic? What makes a character realistic on stage and in a book? Are there different literary tactics? Write a paper that summarizes your arguments.
4. Little is known for sure about the life of Menander. Instead, through the years, a number of stories regarding his life have arisen, but these stories seem mostly to be based on his plays. Creating a biography for ancient writers that is based on their work was once a common practice. Pick a writer, singer, or filmmaker whose work you are fairly familiar with. Then, write a short biography of his or her childhood based on this person’s novels, songs, or films. In order to understand the problems associated with writing this kind of biography, it is important that you use the Internet and the library to compare your biography with the person’s real biography. Also briefly describe the difference between the two biographies—yours and the published one.

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## George Meredith

BORN: 1828, Portsmouth, England

DIED: 1909, Surrey, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856)

*Farina* (1857)

*Modern Love* (1862)

*The Egoist* (1879)

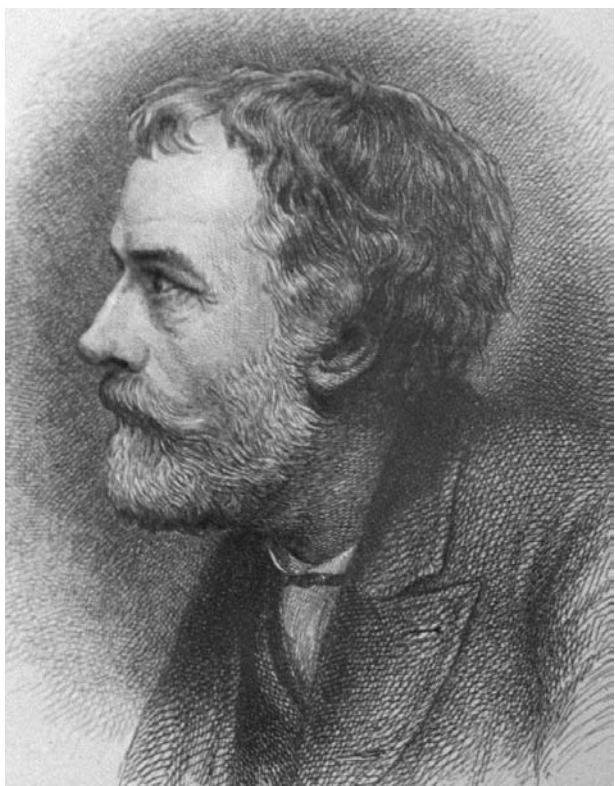
*Diana of the Crossways* (1885)

## Overview

George Meredith is known chiefly as a Victorian novelist and poet who innovated literature by his focus on character psychology rather than plot. His shorter fiction appeared toward the beginning of his career, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, and reached its fullest development in three stories published in the 1870s in the *New Quarterly Magazine*. Meredith’s career developed in conjunction with an era of great change in English society during the second half of the nineteenth century. His treatment of issues such as shifting social class and rapidly developing industrialization established him as a heavy influence on the early modernist writers that would follow him.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**The Victorian Era and False Prosperity** Meredith lived most of his life in a time known as the Victorian era, during which Queen Victoria ruled England and its territories. Queen Victoria sat on the throne longer than any other British monarch, from 1837 until 1901. This period saw significant changes for both Britain and Europe as a whole, with advances in industrialization



George Meredith *Meredith, George, photograph. The Library of Congress.*

leading much of the population to jobs in factories instead of on farms as in the past. The era was also marked by a preoccupation with proper behavior in society and domestic life, a topic which translated into Meredith's works as a concern for social issues and character psychology.

George Meredith was born in Portsmouth, England, on February 12, 1828, to Augustus and Jane Eliza (MacNamara) Meredith. His father inherited a seemingly prosperous Portsmouth naval outfitters and tailor shop from his own father, but he soon discovered that customers were not paying their bills. Augustus ran the failing business at a loss for several years while the family lived extravagantly on the dowry that Meredith's mother had brought into the marriage.

Considering themselves superior to ordinary tradespeople, the Merediths unsuccessfully attempted to establish themselves as the social equals of the elegant patrons of the tailor shop. The young Meredith quickly learned to say nothing of his family's position, instead encouraging the assumption that he was of the gentry. When Meredith was five, his mother died, leaving her money in a trust for her son's education. Lacking access to these funds for his business, Meredith's father was forced into bankruptcy. The boy was sent to boarding schools and had very little contact with his father thereafter.

At fourteen Meredith was sent to school in Neuwied, Germany, where he remained for two years. Upon his return to England, his father wanted to apprentice him to a bookseller and publisher, but Meredith disregarded the suggestion and found a post for himself assisting an attorney, for whom he worked for five years.

**Early Writing, Early Marriage** In his early twenties, Meredith began writing poetry. He became acquainted with Edward Gryffyd Peacock and Mary Nicolls, the son and widowed daughter of the satirist Thomas Love Peacock, a man he admired. With the younger Peacock he collaborated on the publication of a privately circulated literary magazine, *The Monthly Observer*. After a tempestuous relationship with Nicolls, Meredith married her in 1849. The marriage was neither a happy nor a lasting one, in part due to a poor financial situation. His father-in-law offered to secure him an office position, but Meredith preferred to try to make his living by his pen. However, his first book, *Poems*, a volume published at his own expense, attracted little notice and never recouped printing costs.

In 1853 the Merediths' financial difficulties forced them to move in with Thomas Love Peacock. Peacock could not adjust to the disruption of his household, which was exacerbated by the birth of the Merediths' son Arthur later that year, and he eventually quit his own house to take rooms elsewhere. By 1856 Meredith and his wife were living apart, and in 1858 she left for Italy with another man, leaving Meredith with five-year-old Arthur. Meredith's lifetime of reticence about his early years carried over into a stolid refusal to discuss his first marriage, though critics maintain that the sonnet cycle *Modern Love* (1862), which painstakingly details the dissolution of a marriage, actually chronicles that event.

**Failed Relationships, Failed Publications** Meredith's subsequent relationships with women proved for some time unsatisfactory. He lived alone or with male friends for years, traveling extensively in Switzerland, France, and Italy. Upon his second marriage in 1864, Meredith settled at Box Hill, Surrey, where he lived the rest of his life.

During the 1850s, Meredith was gainfully employed in magazine writing. He also began writing longer prose works, beginning with the fictional *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856). The work's favorable reception inspired him to write a serious novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859). This novel, which shocked Victorian society with its sexual and atheistic innuendo, was a source of great controversy upon its publication but quickly faded from popular critical debate.

To recuperate from his first failure, Meredith attempted, according to biographer Ioan Williams, "to reconcile his artistic purpose with the demands of the reading public." Once he despaired of reaching a large audience, Meredith began to write primarily to please

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Meredith's famous contemporaries include:

**Louisa May Alcott** (1832–1888): American novelist best known for her book *Little Women*, she was also a seamstress, servant, teacher, and Civil War nurse before becoming an author.

**Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry** (1828–1826): A French painter who was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1850.

**Dante Gabriel Rossetti** (1828–1882): English poet, painter, illustrator, and translator, he was the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

**Leo Tolstoy** (1828–1891): Russian novelist, essayist, dramatist, and philosopher, he is known for his masterpieces *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*.

himself and the small circle of admirers who had defended and praised his works from the first. It was then that he found his works more popular than at any other time in his career, beginning with his most successful comedy, the novel *The Egoist* (1879).

**Popular Comic Writer** Meredith's popularity grew with subsequent novels. In 1885 he published *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). Inspired by a scandal involving an adulterous married woman accused of selling a state secret, *Diana* attracted readers who believed that the novelist was revealing inside information about this widely discussed affair; in fact, so many readers assumed that the novel reflected the facts of the scandal that later editions contained disclaimers disallowing any connection between Meredith's creation and the affair.

**The Poet Within** Meredith died at Flint Cottage on May 18, 1909, and, according to his wishes, was buried at Dorking Cemetery. His well-known agnosticism prohibited his burial in Westminster Abbey. However, a memorial service was held at the abbey. At the time of his death, Meredith was considered one of England's premier men of letters.

### Works in Literary Context

**Literary Influences** Meredith's early poetry was influenced by John Keats and Alfred Lord Tennyson. As a part-time reader for the publishing firm of Chapman and Hall in the early 1860s, he was able to observe literary trends and to employ them in his early novels. In *Emilia in England* (1864) and its sequel *Vittoria* (1866), for example, Meredith was inspired by the contemporary interest in local-color fiction to give the heroine a vividly realized Italian background and to introduce historical figures and events into the story. In

his position at Chapman and Hall, which he retained until 1894, Meredith also encouraged and influenced such writers as George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, Olive Shreiner, and Robert Louis Stevenson.

**Elaborate Style** As a "poet-novelist," Meredith explored new meters and stanza forms. He experimented dramatically with syntax and grammar. Critics characterize his poetry as verbally dense, full with allusions (references) and rife with metaphor. Thus, his poetry is reflective of the late nineteenth-century inclination toward intentional manipulation of the poetic form.

Meredith's short fiction tends to be more tightly plotted and less given to extended metaphor than his novels, but it still can be seen as characteristically "Meredithian" in style and theme. It is most often characterized by its use of rich psychological portraits and its ambitious and complex strategies of narrative voice. The short stories, as well as the novels, hold an important position in the change from Victorian to modernist moral and aesthetic values—most prominently in their narrative technique, development of female characters, and treatment of diverse psychological perspectives.

**Modern Psychological Themes** Meredith is noted as one of the earliest English psychological novelists. His early novels largely conformed to Victorian literary conventions, and they contain his first attempts at psychological portraiture and are typically concerned with demonstrating the instability of human nature as they satirically attack egoism, pretense, snobbery, and false values. In 1857, after Mary Meredith left England with the painter Henry Wallis, later bearing his child, many of Meredith's short stories featured themes of incompatibility in marriage, as well as a generous appreciation of the woman's position in such situations.

Meredith's later novels also demonstrate a concern with character psychology and modern social problems. Like his short stories in the *New Quarterly Magazine*, the keynote themes include explorations of the danger that egotism poses to the self and others; the social underdog and the slipperiness of self-definition in a rapidly altering society; and the moral integrity, intelligence, and independence of women.

In *Farina*, for example, there are several such themes: First, there is the independence, wit, and courage shown by Margarita, whose father praises her by saying, "she's worthy to be a man." The poor but noble-hearted Farina wins Margarita through courageous action and skill in modern chemistry—he invents *eau de cologne* to rid the city of the devil's stench and becomes a national hero. In the character of Monk Gregory, who cannot resist the temptation to tell others of his miraculous defeat of the devil, Meredith sounds the theme of egotism as a destructive force. Gregory says: "Vanity has wrecked me, in this world and the next. I am the victim of self-incense." "Self-incense," or ego, poses a danger

not only to Gregory's soul but also to the city of Cologne and the German nation.

### Works in Critical Context

During the period from 1860 to 1875, Meredith was consciously responsive to the desires of the book-buying public. Despite the introduction of fictional devices and elements that had proved successful for many other writers of the time, however, he was unable to attract either readers or favorable critical notice. Several critics theorize that Meredith tried in each new novel to correct the faults that had been criticized in the last and to incorporate elements that would appeal to Victorian readers.

Meredith's contribution to the short-story genre reached its height in the 1870s, immediately preceding the publication of one of his most enduring critical and popular successes, *The Egoist*.

***The Egoist* (1879)** Many critics suggest that the mid-Victorian trend toward compact narrative structures inspired Meredith's experimental strategies in *The Egoist*. *The Egoist* is the most successful example of his comic method and remains his most critically praised novel. Critical consensus is that with this work Meredith most successfully combined his theory of comedy, writing style, and thematic concerns. With *The Egoist*, Meredith also finally achieved a popular success that grew with subsequent novels.

Early critics believed that Meredith crafted his books to meet public tastes only as a way to slip in his radical ideas about fickle human values. His novels featured very little action, relying instead on dialogue, or what Meredith called "action of the mind," to advance the story. This resulted in a popular perception of his novels as static and "talky." His prose therefore came to be identified as the barrier that makes his work inaccessible to readers. His supporters, however, praise the poetic quality of his prose, maintaining that each line of Meredith's work is written in the allusive, rich language usually reserved for poetry.

More recent critics, however, now argue that Meredith possessed what Judith Wilt has called a "sensitive and aggressive awareness of the presence, at the heart of his creative art, of the reader." As has been true throughout the history of commentary on Meredith, there remains a dedicated group of admirers who contend, with J. B. Priestley, that Meredith's difficult style, requiring as it does the full and undivided attention of the reader, paved the way for the public acceptance of much subsequent serious fiction, helping to shape "the modern attitude towards fiction and the modern novel itself."

### Responses to Literature

1. Meredith's early novels largely conformed to Victorian literary conventions. Go online to literary sites and databases and find one aspect of Victorian literature to investigate. This could be Victorian literary

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Meredith consistently focused on the social underdog and continued to emphasize the destructiveness of egotism. Here are a few works by writers who also highlighted vanity as a human flaw:

*Barrel Fever* (1994), a collection by David Sedaris. In this collection of humorous stories and essays, the author entertains readers by way of a department store elf, an OCD child, and other pitifully hilarious alter egos.

*A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980), a novel by John Kennedy O'Toole. A modern underdog protagonist with an uncontrollable ego, Ignatius J. Reilly stumbles through a life of failed attempts at work, love, and social protest in this novel.

*The Fountainhead* (1943), a novel by Ayn Rand. An epic novel that displays Rand's belief that "man's ego is the fountainhead of human progress."

*Perelandra* (1943), a novel by C. S. Lewis. This second installment of the Space Trilogy novels presents a unique fictional interpretation of the fall of man.

style, esteemed Victorian writers, lesser-known Victorian writers, publishing venues of the period, differences in the Victorian writing of alternate continents, or even the events and concerns that influenced Victorian themes. When you have printed out examples, return to share your new area of expertise with the group.

2. Throughout his career, Meredith explored the circumscribed role of women in society, a topic known in his day as "the woman question," and had long contended that civilization can only flourish when men and women are equal. Look into feminism in nineteenth-century England. How is the feminist movement reflected in Meredith's works? Can you find other feminist texts that you believe borrow ideas from Meredith's work? How do the works compare? Do the more modern works offer a critique of Meredith's feminism?
3. Following *The Egoist*, Meredith was most concerned with writing psychological novels that portrayed the tangled motivations of individuals and explored the disparity between the public and private aspects of self. In a team effort decide on one character in one of Meredith's stories and explore the traits Meredith mentions for this character. What are the character's desires, fears, impulses, and feelings? What does Meredith try to reveal by describing these character traits?

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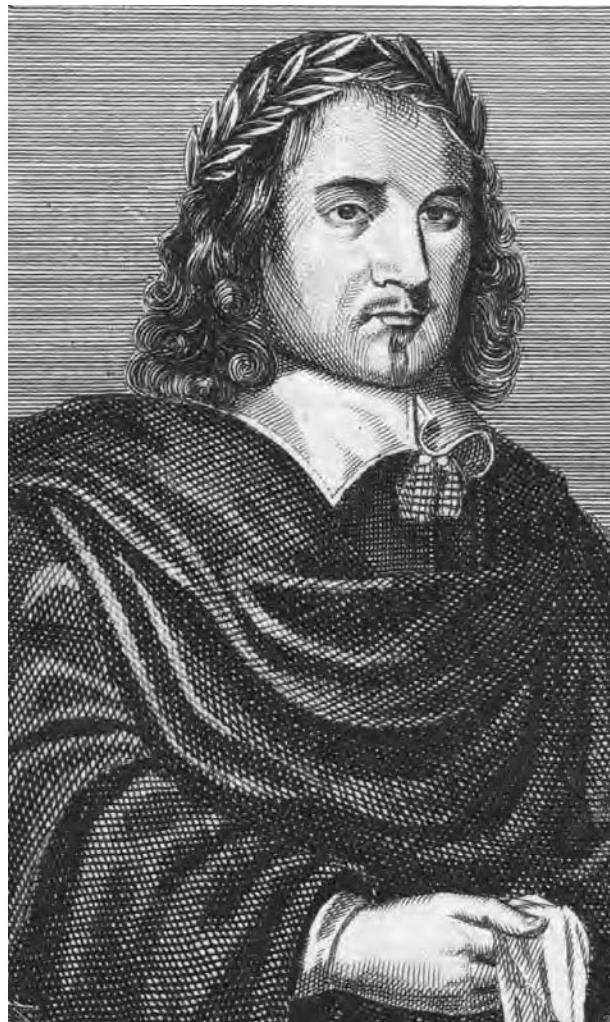
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Thomas Middleton © Hulton-Deutsch Collection / CORBIS

## Thomas Middleton

BORN: 1580, London, England

DIED: 1627, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Puritan* (c. 1606)

*A Yorkshire Tragedy* (c. 1606)

*The Second Maiden's Tragedy* (1611)

*The Changeling* (1622)

*Women Beware Women* (c. 1625)

tragedies of the period, Middleton failed to establish a reputation during his lifetime.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

#### *London to Oxford, Leaving Without a Degree*

Middleton was born in London to prosperous master bricklayer William Middleton and Ann Snow Middleton. No details survive of Thomas Middleton's education before he matriculated at Queen's College, Oxford in April 1598. Middleton did not complete his studies.

#### *Inheritance Disputes Provoke a Zeal for Playwriting*

Middleton's premature departure from Oxford was likely partly impelled by disputes over his father's estate. When William Middleton died in January 1586, he had acquired interests in at least two substantial properties, and his will declared his children as partial heirs. However, their mother's remarriage wreaked havoc on their

### Overview

Thomas Middleton was a prolific Jacobean dramatist whose plays today are regarded as ranking just below those of William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson on the early stage. For twenty years at the beginning of the seventeenth century, only a few playwrights rivaled him. Yet although he wrote some of the best comedies and

future prosperity. Her new husband, Thomas Harvey, was a penniless grocer who had lost what fortune he had with Sir Richard Grenville's expedition to Roanoke Island. (European powers were keen to find ways to profit from the discovery of the Americas, and many risky expeditions to North and South American were undertaken through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Grenville led the first British attempt to colonize Roanoke Island, off the coast of what is now North Carolina, but his attempt failed.) Within weeks of their marriage, husband and wife were quarreling bitterly over control of the children's inheritance. That such control was theirs to quarrel over may seem strange in the contemporary era of protected trust funds and living wills, but during the sixteenth century children had little or no independent legal status, and could thus not directly inherit property until coming of age.

As a writer for the Oxford Middleton Project explains, "So began fifteen years of lawsuits.... Middleton's astute satire of the legal profession... surely has its origin in this extensive early experience." Court appearances reflect that Middleton was evidently in London at the end of 1600, and, as one testimony maintained, "daylie accompaninge the players." His playwriting zeal may have begun at this point.

**One Book Burned, Another Unread** Middleton had, however, also shown early interest in writing. In 1597, when he was only seventeen years old, he published *The Wisdome of Solomon Paraphrased*, a long piece that went virtually unread. Two years later, he experimented with formal satire, but his *Micro-Cynicon: Sixe Snarling Satyres* (1599) brought no greater literary success. Worse, with six other satirical works, it was burned at Stationers' Hall on June 4, 1599, by order of the archbishop of Canterbury.

**A Husband and a Working Dramatist** Some time before 1603, Middleton married Magdalen Marbeck, granddaughter of the well-known musician and theologian John Marbeck. Her brother Thomas was an actor with the Admiral's company. Scholar Mark Eccles suggests that Middleton "met his wife through his association with the Admiral's Men," for whom he started to write plays in the same year. But he might well have met her somewhat earlier and then began to write for the company because of her connections and because he needed employment to support his household.

Middleton is first identified as a working dramatist in Philip Henslowe's *Diary* entry of May 22, 1602, when he shared an advance of five pounds with Anthony Munday, John Webster, and Michael Drayton for a tragedy called *Caesar's Fall or The Two Shapes*. By 1602 Middleton was writing plays for Henslowe and collaborating with Webster, Thomas Dekker, and William Rowley, among others. His relative prosperity did not last. Queen Elizabeth's illness and subsequent death in March 1603 and a

virulent outbreak of plague closed the London theaters for more than a year, until April 9, 1604.

**Plague, Pamphlets, and Plays for Children** King James succeeded Elizabeth to the throne. The period of his reign, 1603–1625, is termed the Jacobean era. The arts flourished under James, as they had under Elizabeth, but not before the plague caused a bumpy start to his reign. Like many of his fellow dramatists, Middleton turned to pamphleteering for an income while theaters were closed. Biographer R. Cecil Bald has Middleton at the November 1603 execution of a Francis Clarke at Winchester and at nearby Newbury at the end of 1603, having left London to escape the plague. *The Ant and the Nightingale or Father Hubbard's Tales* was licensed for publication on January 3, 1604. In March 1604 *The Black Book* was entered in the Stationers' Register.

Early in 1604, as plague deaths abated, Middleton was writing plays again. He composed a string of successful comedies of city life, including *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), his comic masterpiece. Around this time—between 1603 and 1604—he started to write plays for the children known as Paul's Boys, a reference to St. Paul's Cathedral. These children, who attended the cathedral's song school, and in some cases the grammar school, performed near the cathedral. The plays were all comedies and included such titles as his successful *The Puritan* (produced c. 1606).

**Tragedies and Comedies** The three years from early 1604 to the end of 1606 were intensely productive for Middleton, seeing him as a contributor, according to critic M. P. Jackson, of large sections of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. But steady work was cut short when the Paul's company apparently ceased to play around the middle of 1606. Middleton was obliged to find other writing work. In May 1606, he handed over to Robert Keysar, Master of the Blackfriars, another children's company, a manuscript of *The Viper and Her Brood* in satisfaction of a bond. The tragedy is known only from the lawsuit which mentions it. Because this is his only known association with that company, it is likely that Keysar's dissatisfaction over his dealings with Middleton obliged the playwright to look elsewhere for income.

In short time Middleton embarked on a series of tragedies for the King's Men, the preeminent company of players, which contracted with Shakespeare and John Fletcher as their principal playwrights. The best of these, and Middleton's first masterpiece in the genre, was *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c. 1606). His second King's company tragedy of this period was *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (c. 1606). He collaborated with William Rowley on several plays, notably the tragicomedy *The Changeling* (1622)—one of his most respected tragedies.

In the late spring of 1611, the same year he wrote *Second Maiden's Tragedy*, Middleton renewed his collaboration with Dekker to write another comedy for Prince Henry's Men, *The Roaring Girl*. After at least one more

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Middleton's famous contemporaries include:

**René Descartes** (1596–1650): The French philosopher and mathematician known as "The Father of Modern Philosophy" for his profound influences on subsequent generations of thinkers.

**Ling Mengchu** (1580–1644): A Chinese writer of the Ming Dynasty, best known for his short-story collections *Astonished Slaps Upon the Desktop*.

**John Milton** (1608–1674): An English poet and essayist, he is best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

**Saint Vincent de Paul** (1581–1660): A French patron saint who founded several charitable organizations, including Congregation of the Daughters of Charity and the Congregation of Priests of the Mission.

**Rembrandt van Rijn** (1606–1669): A Dutch painter and etcher considered one of the greatest artists in European history.

comedy—*No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (c. 1611)—he began working providing scripts for civic pageant shows, masques, and entertainments for the Lord Mayor of London.

**Chronicler for London and a Fall from Favor**  
Later in 1620, Middleton, by now well established as a deviser of Lord Mayor's shows, gained the post of chronicler to the city of London. The last five years of his career were also occupied with one concluding triumph. His last known play is possibly one that ended his career: a controversial anti-Spanish satire, *A Game at Chess* was licensed for performance on July 9, 1624, and performed by the King's Men at the Globe theater for an unprecedented run of nine performances. The show played to packed houses and brought exceptional returns to the players. But numerous references in contemporary letters show that the play created a minor international incident. The Spanish ambassador complained to King James, who ordered the performances halted, and the Privy Council was commanded to investigate who was responsible for "such insolent and licentious presumption."

The extent to which Middleton's final years were clouded by his connection with *A Game at Chess* is unsure. It seems that he did not write for the King's Men again, or for any other company, and his relations with the civic authorities were shadowed by allegations of "abuses and bad workmanship." Middleton died and was buried in the parish church of Newington Butts, in Southwark, on the south side of the Thames on July 4, 1627. His death passed without remark, either by elegiac verses or the publication of a commemorative collection

such as those done for the works of Jonson and Shakespeare.

### Works in Literary Context

**Surrounding Influences** Middleton's plays, notably his comedies, draw extensively on his experience of London life from a middle position in society. For such plays, short summaries of these comedies show the extent of their common indebtedness to Middleton's close observation of the disreputable side of London life. *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, for example, is Middleton's first venture into the style of Romantic comedy made fashionable by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. The play presents a complexly interwoven tapestry of London characters and manners. As usual, the play centers on battles of wits: There is small security in Middleton's comic world for any character, and even the best of them, such as Touchwood and Moll, can thrive only by their cleverness.

**Comic Style and Jacobean Morality** Middleton's earlier comedies may be characterized generally as realistic farces. The realism is found in the detailed depictions of the excesses of middle- and lower-class London manners and attitudes; many of the rogues and fools are rendered in such meticulous detail that they would be easily recognized by audiences with knowledge of the complex city life the plays treat. Yet some of the characters are grotesques, people who in some ways seem scarcely to inhabit a real world. The exaggeration of their language and reactions, the general implausibility of the situations in which they act, and the buffoonery often introduced by their use of disguise are elements of farce.

Though he is said to have had little enthusiasm or sympathy for such styles as he was obliged to use, Middleton was quick to follow the dictates of contemporary taste. Thus, morality elements are strong in his plays. Middleton had a talent for minimizing fine verse and allowing common moral generalizations to stand out. The plays' feverous vices must often have distracted audiences, so this common feature of Middleton's style was peculiarly effective to remind the audience of a world of morality. This was, it should be noted, necessary given the history of drama in England. For centuries, staged plays were regarded as licentious, wicked, and found their way into the common experience only through heavily Christianized morality plays and passion plays (the latter dramatizing the Christ story). Middleton was, then, caught in an era where moral justification was often still demanded for public performances—long before the dawning of the age of "innocent" entertainment now upon us.

### Works in Critical Context

During his lifetime, Middleton had not established a reputation. Contemporary references to him are few and obligatory; only with the scandal-provoking *A Game at*

*Chess* did he attract much attention. His literary reputation survives largely due to pioneering nineteenth-century scholars, although scholarship on his works is beginning to increase. His reputation in general has suffered from the fact that as a craftsman (rather than an artist) of the theater, he gave in to the dictates of contemporary tastes. This, critics suggest, compelled him to compromise his skills.

His *Second Maiden's Tragedy* (1611), for example, caters to the Jacobean audience's sense of morality, reinforcing it at every turn with a complex structure of contrasts: The true Lady is contrasted with the faithless Wife; spiritual love is set against sensual love. Such a dramatic device is what scholar Anne Lancashire calls "exempla of the rewards of virtue and the evil consequences of vice," and is what earned Middleton his audiences.

**A Critical Resurgence** If Middleton's undeserved obscurity had caused him to be dubbed "the orphan of London," however, all that is set to change. A recent Oxford edition of Middleton's collected works, writes reviewer Gary Taylor for *The Guardian*, signals change: "Thomas Middleton's reputation will be resurrected by a new edition of his collected works. It has taken 75 scholars from a dozen countries 20 years to produce, and the result revolutionises our understanding of the English Renaissance. Middleton is our other [William] Shakespeare: the orphan of London is the only English playwright who can survive the comparison."

## Responses to Literature

1. The picaresque novel was a popular early subgenre of prose fiction. The writing is typically satirical and features a *pícaro*, a scoundrel or rogue, who moves through adventures tricking people and living on his wits. Investigate the components and details of the picaresque novel. Then, consider a Middleton play such as *Father Hubbard's Tale*. How is the play a picaresque work? What characteristics of the play fit the definition?
2. One of the most popular kinds of plays in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the morality play. Middleton gave in to common demands and wrote several of them. Research the elements of a morality play, and identify those elements you find in Middleton's work. What do these characteristics tell you about people of the Jacobean period? How would you describe what was important to them? How do these values compare with values of people today?
3. Middleton made a living in the latter part of his career by writing masques—elaborate and festive entertainments for the court. What performances today would be near equivalents to masques? Who would the performers be? Who might commission such works?
4. Middleton's career as a playwright was delayed for a year due to an outbreak of bubonic plague in Lon-

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In *Women Beware Women*, Middleton makes famous use of the game of chess as a metaphor. Many other authors have featured chess prominently in their works. Examples include:

*The Defense* (1930), a novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Nabokov, himself a chess master, here presents the tale of an awkward young boy who discovers his enormous talent at the game of chess.

*Chess* (1986), a musical by Tim Rice, Björn Ulvaeus, and Benny Andersson. Several songs from this musical became hit singles. The plot centers on a love triangle between major players in the world of chess championships.

*The Flanders Panel* (1990), a novel by Arturo Pérez-Reverte. This novel centers on a mystery hidden in a fifteenth-century Flemish painting titled "The Chess Game."

*The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (2007), a novel by Michael Chabon. This detective novel is set in an alternate-reality future in which Jewish refugees set up a settlement in Alaska after World War II. Chess figures prominently in the novel, both in the youth of the homicide detective and in clues surrounding a mystery he must solve.

don. Using your library or the Internet, research bubonic plague. In what ways were the realities of the plague reflected in Middleton's work?

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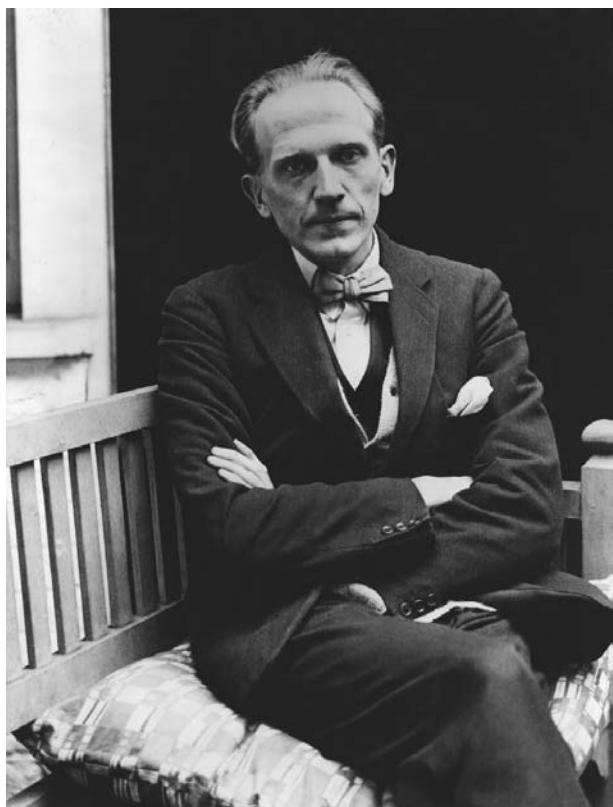
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A. A. Milne Milne, A. A., photograph.

## ■ A. A. Milne

BORN: 1882, London, England

DIED: 1956, Sussex, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction, poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*When We Were Very Young* (1924)

*Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926)

*Now We Are Six* (1927)

*The House at Pooh Corner* (1928)

### Overview

British author A. A. Milne wrote plays, essays, novels, and light verse for adults; however, his most critically acclaimed works were his "four trifles for the young," as he called them, his children's tales and poems, some of which featured his best-known literary creation, Winnie-the-Pooh. Milne has been praised for his accurate and sympathetic observations of children's behavior, his wit, and his skill with language, especially wordplay and dialogue.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Family and Early Life** Alan Alexander Milne was born January 18, 1882, in London, England, to John

Vine Milne, a school headmaster, and Sarah Maria Heginbotham Milne. He attended Cambridge University, where he edited the undergraduate paper *The Granta*. Upon completion of his degree in mathematics in 1903, he moved to London and worked as a freelance journalist. In 1906, he accepted an assistant editorship with the magazine *Punch*, where he worked for eight years, contributing humorous essays and verse. Milne married Dorothy de Selincourt in 1913 and their son, Christopher Robin, was born in 1920.

**First Plays and Mystery Novels** In 1914, the start of World War I, he joined the army. Milne had already published three collections of essays from *Punch* and was becoming well-known as a humorist. His work as a dramatist began during his military service. His first play appeared in 1917, and his one unqualified success in the theater, *Mr. Pim Passes By*, was completed and produced in 1919. He also wrote two mystery novels; *Red House Mystery* (1921) is considered a classic in the genre and helped establish the conventions of British detective fiction between World War I and World War II. In an introduction he wrote for the 1926 reprint, Milne says he set four goals for himself. The mystery should be written in simple English; there must be no love interest; the detective must have a confidant with whom to discuss the case, clue by clue; and, most important, the detective must be an amateur.

**When We Were Very Young** Occasional poems written for his son Christopher quickly grew into the collections *When We Were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We Are Six* (1927). *When We Were Very Young* was immediately recognized as a new kind of children's book, one that moved away from fairytales and the overly didactic literature of the time and portrayed children realistically in an enjoyable, stylish manner. Throughout the poems, the child questions the power that adults command.

*When We Were Very Young* paved the way for *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and helped to immortalize the name Christopher Robin, to the embarrassment of the actual Christopher Robin Milne, who spent much of his life attempting to disentangle himself from the semibio-graphical, fictional character.

**Winnie-the-Pooh** *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* were successful with both critics and the public, but they were soon surpassed by the stories in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928). Milne wrote these works after observing the interaction between Christopher and his mother and the boy's beloved stuffed animals. Both Milne's verses and the Pooh stories became a publishing phenomenon.

Much of the delight of *Winnie-the-Pooh* comes from the illustrations by E. H. Shepard. Because Milne had acknowledged that part of the success of *When We Were Very Young* resulted from Shepard's illustrations, Shepard was asked to illustrate *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The original illustrations were black and white. When Shepard was in his eighties, he undertook the task of coloring the original illustrations.

**Later Life** Milne continued to write plays following the publication of his children's books, but publishers remained more interested in his work in the latter genre than in adult literature. He traveled throughout the United States in the fall of 1931 and continued writing mostly unnoticed books and plays until 1952, the year he suffered a stroke. He died January 31, 1956, at his home in Sussex, England.

### Works in Literary Context

As a poet, A. A. Milne has been compared favorably with such writers as Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Walter de la Mare; his poems are distinguished by their variety of form and rhythm. Barbara Novak writes:

Often . . . they have the kind of nonsense whimsy which is too often lost in expression by and for adults. Thus, in 'Halfway Down,' the child sits on a stair which really isn't anywhere but somewhere else instead. We are reminded here of E. E. Cummings' use of this sort of expression, though Milne's poetry differs in that it is not a sophisticated adult use of a child's manner of expression, but rather, the expression of a poet who has never lost the ability to think, feel, and express as a child.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Milne's famous contemporaries include:

**J. M. Barrie** (1860–1937): Scottish novelist and playwright, best known for his children's book *Peter Pan*. A friend of Milne, Barrie helped get Milne's first play produced.

**Irene Joliot-Curie** (1897–1956): French chemist and daughter of dual Nobel Prize-winning scientist Marie Curie who, with her husband, was awarded the 1935 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for the discovery of artificial radioactivity.

**J. Robert Oppenheimer** (1904–1967): As an American physicist, Oppenheimer became the director of the Manhattan Project during World War II, which developed the first nuclear weapons.

**Dorothy Sayers** (1893–1957): British writer and mystery novelist. Sayers is well-known for her mysteries featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, set in England between World War I and World War II.

**P. G. Wodehouse** (1881–1975): British writer and lyricist. Wodehouse is characterized by his humorous short stories featuring the bumbling aristocrat Bertie Wooster and his long-suffering butler Jeeves.

**Humor and Fantasy** Milne's style of humor is not blatant or overt; in fact, an anonymous literary critic in the October 1912 issue of *The Academy* once suggested "his quips and jokes are delicate, requiring the dainty palate for their finest appreciation." Though today's readers know Milne for his Winnie-the-Pooh character, Milne captured readers of his day with dry wit. He approached humor with subtlety, particularly in works like *The Day's Play* (1910). As another anonymous reviewer noted in an October 1910 issue of *The Academy*, Milne's "fantasies" derived from some "capital clowning," the obvious result of his keen eye toward "comical, topsy-turvy reasoning." Furthermore, Milne's knack for "clever rhyming," as well as the way in which he twisted the meaning of ordinary words surprised and delighted turn-of-the-century readers.

**Family Inspiration** In contrast to the dark, brooding imagery due to arrive in the twentieth century, the Victorian period was characterized by idealized, domestic images. Unlike his contemporaries (such as Ezra Pound and Aldous Huxley) who, in their art, directly responded to bleak social and political changes, Milne often looked backward to the sentimental Victorian years for artistic inspiration. Milne often acknowledged that he did not have an idyllic childhood, and some critics wonder if that may be the reason for his family focus and domestic

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

A. A. Milne's books came at the end of what has been called the "Golden Age" of British and American children's literature, from 1865 to 1928. Children's books in this period focused on playfulness and the power of the imagination. Here are some other childrens's works from this period:

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), by Lewis Carroll. This work ushered in the Golden Age. It tells the story of Alice, a girl who falls down a rabbit hole, and her surreal adventures that follow.

*Five Children and It* (1902), by Edith Nesbit. In this story, five siblings come across a sand fairy that grants them one wish per day, with humorously disastrous consequences.

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), by Beatrix Potter. The first of many books Potter wrote featuring animals, this short book tells of the adventures of Peter, a mischievous bunny, in Mr. McGregor's garden.

*The Wind in the Willows* (1908), by Kenneth Grahame. Later adapted for the stage by Milne, this novel tells the story of four animal friends, notably the boastful Toad.

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), by L. Frank Baum. This novel, made into a famous 1939 movie starring Judy Garland, follows Dorothy, a girl from Kansas, who is caught up in a tornado and deposited in the fantastic land of Oz.

satire. Many contemporary critics, like Geoffrey Cocks, relate the strong female characters in Milne's work to his domineering mother: for example, Countess Belvane in the play *Once Upon a Time* (1917). These critics see Milne's "art as a sublimation of psychological conflict" that came from his early years.

### Works in Critical Context

Although the critical response to *Now We Are Six* was generally full of praise, Dorothy Parker, a writer for *The New Yorker*, expressed distaste. Writing as "Constant Reader," she stated: "Of Milne's recent verse, I speak in a minority amounting to solitude. I think it is affected, commonplace, bad.... And now I must stop to get ready for being ridden out of town on a rail."

Several reasons have been given for the popularity of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. For example, readers and critics alike are drawn to the way in which the book both shows how essential the capacity for friendship is to human life and reveals how essential the ability to overlook the faults of one's friends is to achieving a joyful human existence. Additionally, as Peter Hunt observes, its "sophisticated writing, the pace, the timing, and the narrative stance all contribut[e] to the comic effect." Furthermore, Ann

Thwaite finds that "part of the strength and charm of the stories comes from the juxtaposition of toy animal and forest."

Regarding Milne's poetic style, Barbara Novak writes: "We might almost say that Milne's poetic content falls into two broad categories: one in which the poet expresses something *for* the child, and one in which he expresses *to* the child." Certainly, in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, two voices are frequently heard: Christopher Robin's words and narratives are intertwined with A. A. Milne's words and narratives. Milne is purportedly telling Christopher Robin the stories that Christopher Robin remembers, and then does not remember, and then wishes to be told again. Not all critics regard the authorial confusions between Milne and Christopher Robin as flattering to the child, who expresses delight in finding himself elevated into a creative authorial role. Alison Lurie, for instance, regards these dialogues as "condescending conversations between the author and Christopher Robin."

### Responses to Literature

1. Think about a mystery novel you have read, or a detective show you have seen on TV. Write an informal, two-page essay explaining whether or not you think they follow the mystery genre guidelines that Milne established.
2. Many crime dramas today have professional investigators or doctors as the detectives. With a classmate, discuss the role of the reader when the person solving the crime has more information than the reader does. Why do you think Milne felt having an "amateur" detective was important?
3. Read some poems from *When We Were Very Young* or *Now We Are Six*. Do you agree with Dorothy Parker that they are "affected" and saccharine? Write an essay explaining your views, and argue whether children's literature should be an escape or should reflect real life.
4. Read some poems from contemporary children's poet Shel Silverstein, and write an essay comparing and contrasting Milne's verse with Silverstein's. Do you think they are both classic children's authors? Explain your opinion, using specific examples.
5. Using resources from your library or the Internet, look up the original illustrations in *The House at Pooh Corner*, and compare them to the Disney portrayal. Then think about movies based on books you have read, such as the Harry Potter, *Lord of the Rings*, or Narnia movies. Write an essay analyzing how seeing someone else's vision of a book affects your own vision when you reread it. Does it change how you see the characters in your own mind?

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## Czeslaw Milosz

BORN: 1911, Szetejnie, Lithuania (Russian Empire)

DIED: 2004, Cracow, Poland

NATIONALITY: Polish

GENRE: Poetry, essays, novels

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Captive Mind* (1953)

*Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (1959)

*A Year of the Hunter* (1994)

*Roadside Dog* (1999)



Czeslaw Milosz Milosz, Czeslaw, University of Jagellonian, Cracow, Poland, 1981, photograph. Keystone / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

*Milosz's ABCs* (2001)

*To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays* (2001)

## Overview

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, essayist, novelist, translator, and editor, Czeslaw Milosz (pronounced *Mee-wosh*) is widely considered Poland's greatest contemporary poet, although he lived in exile from his native land after 1951. Milosz's writings are concerned with humanistic and Christian themes, the problem of good and evil, political philosophy, history, metaphysical speculations, and personal and national identity.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Birth and Early Life in Poland** Milosz was born on June 30, 1911, in Szetejnie, Lithuania, then a part of tsarist Russia, to Polish-Lithuanian parents. His father, Alexander, was a road engineer and was recruited by the Tsar's army during World War I. Young Milosz and his mother traveled with Alexander on the dangerous bridge-building expeditions to which he was dispatched near Russian battle zones.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Milosz's famous contemporaries include:

**Robert Haas** (1941–): American poet who has served two terms as U.S. Poet Laureate (from 1995–1997) and has contributed greatly to contemporary literature.

**Johnny Mercer** (1909–1976): American songwriter and singer responsible for many of the popular hits of the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s. The recipient of nineteen Academy Award nominations for his songs for movies, Mercer was also a cofounder of Capitol Records.

**Robert Pinsky** (1940–): American poet, essayist, literary critic, and translator best known as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1997 to 2000.

**Peter Dale Scott** (1929–): Canadian poet and former English professor at the University of California, Berkeley. Scott is best known for his antiwar stance and criticism of U.S. foreign policy dating back to the Vietnam War.

**Humphrey Searle** (1915–1982): British composer who as a pioneer of serial music also helped to further it by way of his clout as a BBC producer.

His family returned to Lithuania in 1918, and Milosz began a strict Roman Catholic education in his hometown of Vilnius, the capital of Polish Lithuania. In his early twenties, he published his first volume of poems, *A Poem on Frozen Time*. In 1934 he graduated from the King Stefan Batory University, and in 1936 his second volume of poetry appeared. He earned a scholarship to study at the Alliance Française in Paris, where he met up with his distant cousin, Oscar Milosz, a French poet who became his mentor. He recounted his early life in the acclaimed memoir *Native Realm*.

**World War II and the Nazi Occupation of Warsaw** Milosz returned to Poland to work for the Polish State Broadcasting Company. He held this position until the outbreak of World War II. During the Nazi occupation, he stayed in Warsaw where he joined the underground resistance movement. He had an anthology of anti-Nazi poetry, *The Invincible Song*, published by underground presses in Warsaw, where he also wrote "The World (A Naïve Poem)" and the cycle *Voices of Poor People*.

Warsaw was virtually destroyed by Nazi air force bombing campaigns in response to the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 (an attempt by a Polish insurgent army to force the Germans out of Warsaw). The insurgents had been promised Soviet aid, but it never arrived. Thousands were killed, including most of the young intellectuals and resistance fighters that made up the insurgency. It was speculated that Soviet leader

Josef Stalin's failure to come to their rescue was deliberate: A ruined Warsaw was much easier for him to seize after World War II was over. Milosz survived, and moved to just outside Cracow, whose state publishing house brought out his collected poems in a volume called *Rescue*.

**Ketman and the Failure of the Polish Intelligentsia** At the end of World War II, Milosz worked as a cultural attaché for the Polish Communist government, serving in New York and Washington. He left his position with the Polish Foreign Service in 1951 and sought (and received) political asylum in France. Milosz spent ten years in France, where he found himself having difficulty fitting in with the strongly pro-socialist and Communist intellectual community, whose views he considered corrupt or naïve. He penned two novels during his time in Paris, *Seizure of Power* and *The Issa Valley*. His most famous book, *The Captive Mind*, was a bitter attack on the manner in which the Polish Communist Party progressively destroyed the independence of the country's intelligentsia, in essence forcing them to accept and even perpetrate intellectual repression.

Milosz continued to speak out against the way Polish intellectuals had adopted the stance of the Communist leaders. Too often, he believed, his contemporaries would go along with their new masters while secretly believing they could in some way still maintain their own intellectual autonomy. This phenomenon he termed "Ketman," and in it he saw the downfall of a free intelligentsia in Poland.

**Success in the United States** Milosz ultimately felt that the only way to maintain his own intellectual autonomy was in self-imposed exile in the United States. From there, he hoped to contribute to a regeneration of Eastern European culture once the wave of communism had passed. At age fifty, Milosz began a new career as a professor of Slavic languages and literature at the University of California at Berkeley in 1961 (some sources say 1960). He was initially an unknown member of a small department, but eventually he became popular on campus for his courses on Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

By the 1970s Milosz's poetry and fiction were increasingly attracting the attention of Western critics. In 1976 he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In 1978 he published the poetry collection *Bells in Winter*, for which he received the Neustadt International Literature Prize. In 1980 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

**Back to Polish Roots and a Focus on Roman Catholicism** By this time, many of his poems had become infused with Christian themes connected to Milosz's Roman Catholic upbringing. There was also a growing sadness and premonition of oncoming death, especially after the death of his wife Janina in 1986. Then, in 1989, the Soviet Union crumbled and the old barriers to travel in Eastern Europe were eased. Milosz was able

to return to his roots. After visiting Lithuania in the spring of 1989, Milosz was flooded with memories about his childhood in the Issa River Valley. He was soon able to return to Poland, where his work had been banned for decades. He was greeted with a hero's welcome and a home in Cracow, courtesy of the Polish people. Despite being afflicted with asthma and declining health, Milosz managed to also release another volume of poetry in 1995, *Facing the River*. In 1997 he published his correspondence with poet and monk Thomas Merton, a speculative epistolary history of their inner worlds. He followed this with 1998's *Roadside Dog*, a collection of poetry.

In April of 2001 Milosz published a book-length poem entitled *Treatise on Poetry*, translated by Robert Haas. The four parts of the poem deal with turn-of-the-century Europe, Poland between the two world wars, World War II, and the place of the poet in the postwar world. Later that year, a book of essays entitled *To Begin Where I Am: The Selected Prose of Czeslaw Milosz* made its appearance. These essays chiefly deal with Milosz's attempts to sustain his religious faith, and with his battle for poetry that is "on the side of man."

Milosz died on August 14, 2004, at his home in Cracow, Poland. He was ninety-three years old.

### Works in Literary Context

Milosz received a broad education during his studies in Vilnius and he read widely thereafter. Particularly important in shaping Milosz's outlook were Russian novelists, poets, and religious thinkers such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev, and Nikolay Aleksandrovich Berdyayev (and later Lev Shestov). He also read French novels by such writers as Stendahl, Honoré de Balzac, and André Gide. As far as poetry is concerned, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Robert Browning, and T.S. Eliot were influences once Milosz learned enough English in occupied Warsaw.

**The Voice of Experience** In most of his work, Milosz avoided the experimentation with language that characterizes much modern poetry, concentrating more on the clear expression of his ideas. Much of Milosz's work is strongly emotional and conveys a transcendent spirituality. Critics have commented on the influence of his Roman Catholic background and his fascination with good and evil in both his poetry and his prose. Milosz's personal experiences, his interest in history and politics, and his aesthetic theories are delineated in his prose works.

For example, his essay collection *The Captive Mind* studies the effects of totalitarianism on creativity, while *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* is a lyrical re-creation of the landscape and culture of Milosz's youth. In the nonfiction work *The Land of Ulro*, Milosz laments the modern emphasis on science and rationality, which he feels has divorced human beings from spiritual and cultural pursuits, by evoking a symbolic wasteland that appears in several of William Blake's mythological poems. His essay

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Milosz explored in his poetry both the rebirth of Christian belief and the corruption of thought by ideology. His is a frequently difficult and obscure poetry that is burdened by a sense of the oncoming collapse of civilization. Here are a few works by writers who have created similar poetry:

*The Waste Land* (1922), by T. S. Eliot. A seminal work by the Nobel Prize-winning English poet that explores the disillusionment, spiritual ennui, and casual sexuality of post-World War I European sensibility.

*The Darkness and the Light* (2001), by Anthony Hecht. A collection of poems by the Nobel Prize-winning American that reflect the technical, intellectual, and emotional horrors of the Holocaust and World War II.

*Could Have* (1972), by Wislawa Szymborska. A collection of poems by the 1996 Nobel Prize winner, which investigates reality and truth and the burdens within each in witty, subversive tones.

collection *Beginning with My Streets: Essays and Recollections*—an amalgam of literary criticism, philosophical meditations, and narrative essays—has been praised for its insightful probing of contemporary life, art, and politics.

Milosz's two novels also combine explorations of twentieth-century world events with autobiographical elements. *The Seizure of Power* examines the fortunes of intellectuals and artists within a Communist state. Blending journalistic and poetic prose, this work elucidates the relationship between art and ideology and offers vivid descriptions of the Russian occupation of Warsaw following World War II. In *The Issa Valley*, Milosz evokes the lush river valley where he was raised to explore a young man's evolving artistic sensibility. The mythical structure of this work explores such dualities as innocence and evil, regeneration and death, and idyllic visions and grim realities.

People and circumstances impacted Milosz's life, thought, and work, from the Nazi invasion to individuals such as Oscar Milosz, a French poet who became his mentor early on. Likewise, Milosz influenced several readers, students, friends, and fellow faculty. At Berkeley, both students and colleagues—such as Robert Pinsky, Robert Haas, and Peter Dale Scott—participated in the small press printing of several of the poet's works.

### Works in Critical Context

Milosz faced resistance and skepticism in the years following World War II. His work was banned by the Communist regime of his native Poland and some European American intellectuals regarded him with mistrust because he did not fit neatly into a political category.

For the past several decades, however, his work has inspired near universal praise from critics and has even earned a widespread popular following.

**The Captive Mind** *The Captive Mind* explains Milosz's reasons for defecting and examines the life of the artist under a Communist regime. It is, maintains Steve Wasserman in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, a "brilliant and original study of the totalitarian mentality." Karl Jaspers, in an article for the *Saturday Review*, describes *The Captive Mind* as "a significant historical document and analysis of the highest order.... In astonishing gradations Milosz shows what happens to men subjected simultaneously to constant threat of annihilation and to the promptings of faith in a historical necessity which exerts apparently irresistible force and achieves enormous success. We are presented with a vivid picture of the forms of concealment, of inner transformation, of the sudden bolt to conversion, of the cleavage of man into two."

**A Year of the Hunter** *A Year of the Hunter* is a journal Milosz penned between August 1987 and August 1988. Ian Buruma praised the work in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* as "a wonderful addition to [his] other autobiographical writing. The diary form, free-floating, wide-ranging...is suited to a poet, especially an intellectual poet, like Milosz," allowing for his entries to range from gardening to translating, from communism to Christianity, from past to present. Indeed, as Michael Ignatieff stated in the *New York Review of Books*, *A Year of the Hunter* is successful "because Milosz has not cleaned it up too much. Its randomness is a pleasure."

**Milosz's ABCs** A critic for *Publishers Weekly* noted the following lines from *Milosz's ABCs*: "Man has been given to understand/ that he lives only by the grace of those in power./ Let him therefore busy himself sipping coffee, catching butterflies...." The same critic then commented, "It is difficult to escape the sense that—like butterflies in a dusty case—the scraps of memory affixed here have lost their living glitter."

But Edward Hirsch said in *The New York Times Book Review* that *Milosz's ABCs* "is a source of wonderment and pleasure that at the age of 89, Czeslaw Milosz, arguably the greatest living poet, continues to publish exploratory works of self-definition and commemoration.... In the end, *Milosz's ABCs* is a benedictory text, an alphabetical rescue operation, a testimonial to those who have suffered and gone before us, a hymn to the everlasting marvel and mystery of human existence."

## Responses to Literature

1. Milosz is quoted as saying, "Yes I would like to be a poet of the five senses. That's why I don't allow myself to become one." What does he mean by this? Do you agree that Milosz is not a poet of the five senses? Why or why not?

2. Identifying with nature allowed Milosz to maintain an identity even in exile. Read the following section from *Throughout Our Lands* and write about nature and its influence on identity as Milosz sees it. Do you agree that identification with nature helps one maintain their identity? Why or why not?

Wherever you are, you touch the bark of trees  
testing its roughness different yet familiar, grateful  
for a rising and a setting sun Wherever you are, you  
could never be an alien.

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## John Milton

BORN: 1608, London, England

DIED: 1674, London, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Nonfiction, poetry

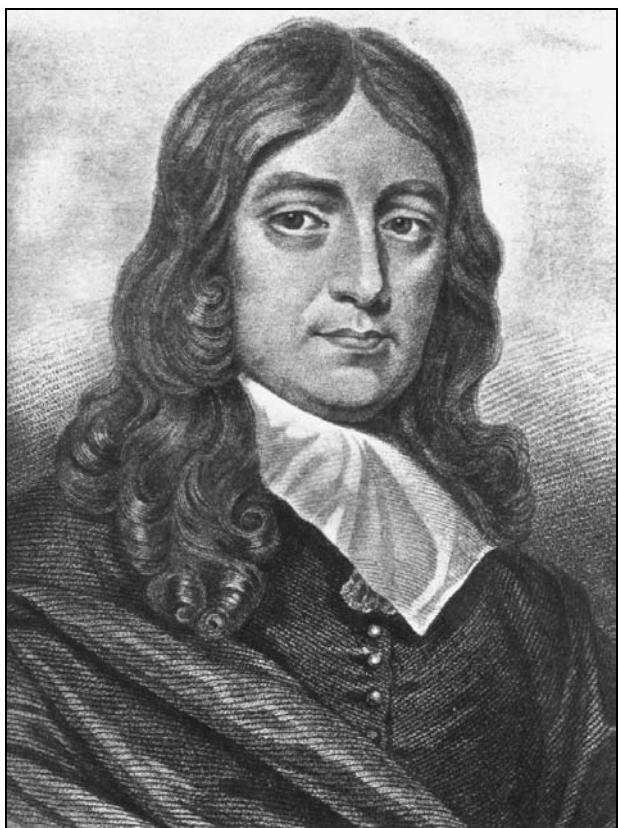
MAJOR WORKS:

"Lycidas" (1638)

*Areopagitica* (1644)

*Paradise Lost* (1667)

*Paradise Regained* (1671)



John Milton *Milton, John, engraving.* The Library of Congress.

## Overview

English writer John Milton used both his poetry and prose to address issues of religion and politics. Placing himself in a line of poets whose art was an outlet for their public voice and using the pastoral poem to present an outlook on politics, Milton aimed to promote an enlightened commonwealth, not unlike the *polis* of Greek antiquity or the cultured city-states in Renaissance Italy. Because of its length, complexity, and consummate artistry, his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) is considered Milton's masterpiece.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Gifted Young Student** Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608, to John Milton Sr. and Sara Jeffrey Milton. Milton's father was a prosperous scrivener (scribe), while his mother was a gentlewoman known for her charitable works. From an early age he was immersed in literary and intellectual activity. Milton had a superior education that stressed the classics, music, and foreign languages. A highly gifted student, Milton demonstrated a faculty for language, learning Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, and Italian while still quite young. Milton's young intellect was also nurtured by a private tutor,

Thomas Young. Milton entered Christ's College at Cambridge University in 1625.

Though Milton's father had been raised in a staunchly Catholic family, he renounced the Catholic faith and became a Protestant. Milton was raised in a Protestant environment. In England at this time, religious tensions were high. King Charles I took the throne in 1625 and was widely believed to have Catholic leanings—even marrying a Catholic woman, Henrietta Maria of France—though the British monarchy was entrenched in Protestant beliefs. Charles I also faced conflict with the rising middle class, which was primarily Puritan (a Protestant sect), and which sought to make parliament superior to the king. Charles I believed firmly in the divine right of kings (that is, a monarch has a right to rule from the will of God, not from a temporal authority). This tension grew heated over the next two decades.

**First Important Poems** At first unpopular, Milton eventually made a name for himself as a rhetorician and public speaker. While at Cambridge he probably wrote "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," and "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," three of his earliest great poems in English. Upon graduating in 1632, Milton devoted himself to intense study and writing. To this period scholars assign the composition of some of Milton's finest nonepic poems, including "Lycidas" (1638).

The purpose of "Lycidas" was twofold: to honor the late Edward King, a former schoolmate at Christ's College, and to denounce incompetent clergy—a perennial concern of Milton's. The poem also reveals Milton's own philosophical ambitions—later undertaken in *Paradise Lost*—to justify God's ways to humanity. Many critics consider "Lycidas" the finest short poem in the English language.

**Created on Commission** Milton also wrote his first extended work, *Comus*, in 1637 on commission. The play is in the Elizabethan court masque tradition. Here, in exchanges between two young brothers, a lady, and the tempter Comus, Milton explored the merits of "moral discipline" and the dangers of sexual license.

In May 1638, Milton embarked on a long journey through Italy. The experience, which he described in *Second Defence of the People of England* (1654), brought him into contact with the leading men of letters in Florence, Rome, and Naples. Upon his return to England, Milton wrote the Italy-inspired *Damon* (1640).

**The English Civil War** With the advent of English Civil War, Milton's life changed utterly as his attentions shifted from private to public concerns. The English Civil War was a result of the discontent between Charles I and his subjects. Beginning in 1642, armed conflict broke out between the antiroyalist Puritans and Scots and the royalists, who supported the monarchy, and who included the Welsh. Abruptly Milton left off writing poetry for prose, pouring out pamphlets during the early 1640s in which he opposed what he considered rampant episcopal

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Milton's famous contemporaries include:

**Gian Lorenzo Bernini** (1598–1680): Italian sculptor and architect in the Baroque style. He was extensively involved, among other works, with the design of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City in Rome.

**Galileo Galilei** (1564–1642): Italian scientist whom Milton met during his trip to Italy. Galileo theorized that the earth revolves around the sun, which was considered heresy by the church, and was forced to recant his belief. His books include *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632).

**William Laud** (1573–1645): Archbishop of Canterbury, England. Laud encouraged King Charles I to believe that the monarchy was accountable only to God, not its subjects, and was beheaded during the English Civil War.

**Andrew Marvell** (1621–1678): English poet. One of the so-called metaphysical poets, Marvell was concerned with questions about the nature of the soul. His poems include *Last Instructions to a Painter* (1667).

**Johannes Vermeer** (1632–1675): Dutch painter, known for the quality of light in his paintings. The 2003 movie *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is based on Tracy Chevalier's 1999 novel about the model for Vermeer's famous portrait of the same title.

tyranny. He declared his Puritan allegiance in tracts in which he argued the need to purge the Church of England of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism and restore the simplicity of the apostolic (that is, early) church.

During this period, Milton also published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes from the Bondage of Canon Law* (1643), in which he maintained that incompatibility is a valid reason for divorce. This work was presumably inspired by his hasty marriage in 1642 to his first wife, Mary Powell, who left him shortly after the wedding but returned to him three years later. After bearing four children, she died in 1652 from childbirth complications, and Milton married Katherine Woodcock in 1658. She died in 1658 after giving birth to their daughter, who also died. Milton married for the last time in 1663 to twenty-four-year-old Betty Minshull.

In 1644, Milton published *Areopagitica*, often cited as one of the most compelling arguments for the freedom of the press. During the next few years Milton worked on his *History of Britain* (1670). With Puritan leader Oliver Cromwell's execution of King Charles I in 1649, however, Milton entered the political fray with *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), an assertion of the right of

a people to depose or execute a ruling tyrant. This view was a complete about-face for Milton, who had written as a good monarchist in his early antiprelatical, or anticlergy, works.

**Continued Focus on Affairs of State** After the execution of Charles I, Cromwell declared England a Commonwealth and himself ruler. Milton accepted an invitation to become Cromwell's Latin secretary for foreign affairs and soon wrote a number of tracts on church and state issues, including *A Defence of the People of England* (1651) and *Second Defence of the People of England* (1654), two reviews praising the achievements of Cromwell's government. Cromwell ruled until his death in 1658 and was briefly succeeded by his son Richard, until Charles II, the eldest son of the executed king, was crowned in 1660. After the restoration of the monarchy, Milton was dismissed from governmental service, arrested, and imprisoned. Payment of fines and the intercession of friends and family, including Andrew Marvell, Sir William Davenant, and perhaps Christopher Milton, his younger brother and a royalist lawyer, brought about his release.

**Completed Paradise Lost** Completely blind since 1652 (Milton acknowledged that in his youth he rarely quit his books before midnight and attributed his later blindness to excessive reading by candlelight), Milton increasingly devoted his time to poetry. Helpers, assisted sometimes by Milton's two nephews and his daughter Deborah, were employed to take dictation and read aloud and correct copy. During the writing of *Paradise Lost*, Milton spent mornings dictating passages he had composed in his head at night.

*Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, an epic poem recounting the biblical story of humanity's fall from grace. This work and its sequel, *Paradise Regained* (1671), are celebrated for their consummate artistry and searching consideration of God's relationship with the human race. *Samson Agonistes* (1671), a tragedy, appeared in the same volume as *Paradise Regained*. In 1673, Milton embraced controversy once again with *Of True Religion*, a short defense of Protestantism. He died in November 1674, apparently of complications related to gout (a disease created by a buildup of uric acid).

### Works in Literary Context

As was common in his time, Milton was educated in the classics and the Bible and drew on such works for inspiration. He was also very much a product of his time, writing about issues related to the English Civil War, the rule of Cromwell, and other events and beliefs of his time. Politics was an important part of Milton's life, and his works often reflected this.

**The Fall of Man** As a classicist, Milton was powerfully aware of his antique antecedents. He had long planned an epic that was to be to England what Homer's works were to Greece and the *Aeneid* was to Rome.

Although he contemplated writing about King Arthur for his national poem, he later adopted a biblical subject in *Paradise Lost*: the Fall of Man as described in the book of Genesis. He begins the poem *in media res*, in the middle of things, plunging into the action with a description of Satan in hell. The remainder of the poem treats Satan's deception of Eve in Eden, her deception of Adam, their fall from perfect fellowship with God and with each other, and their banishment from Paradise. Everywhere, the poem is strong in its appeal to the ear, the intellect, and the visual imagination. While the iambic pentameter line is the norm, Milton played with the model, contriving syllables and stresses to complement the sense.

Milton's high purpose in the poem, to "justify the ways of God to men," is ever in the forefront of the action. Critics agree that this challenging objective, made all the more difficult by the complicated issue of divine foreknowledge of the Fall, is effected chiefly by imbuing Adam with a will as well as a mind of his own, enabling him to disobey God and thus mar an omnipotent Creator's perfect creation. *Paradise Regained*—more a dramatic poem than an epic—completes the action of *Paradise Lost*. Shorter and conceptually much simpler than the earlier work, *Paradise Regained* depicts Christ in the wilderness overcoming Satan the tempter. By this action, Christ proves his fitness as the Son of God, thereby preparing himself for his human, substitutionary role in the Crucifixion.

**Political Idealism** Milton's later influence derives from both his prose and his poetry. His influence as a political writer was felt in the American, French, and Russian revolutions, when he was cited to justify the opposition to monarchs and absolutists. Among the English Romantics, Milton was extolled as a libertarian and political revolutionary. His refusal to compromise on matters of principle, his blindness, and his punishment after the Restoration caused many admirers to cite him as a model of the spokesperson of truth and of someone who pursued idealism despite adversity.

**Influence** Milton's influence on later literature—particularly on eighteenth-century verse—was immense, though his reputation had waned considerably by the Victorian age. By the second half of the twentieth century, however, his works had regained their place in the canon of Western literature.

### Works in Critical Context

It would be difficult to overestimate Milton's importance in English letters. In *Paradise Lost*, he gave his country its greatest epic, surpassing, most commentators believe, even Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* in the greatness of his achievement in this form. And as the author of "Lycidas," "L'Allegro," and "Il Penseroso" Milton also established himself as a master of the shorter poem. He helped fuel governmental reform and argued eloquently for major social change. Perhaps most telling of all, he wrote, unlike his nearest English rivals for literary emi-

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Epic poems are long narrative poems in an elevated style that usually celebrate heroic achievement and treat themes of historical, national, religious, or legendary significance. They appear in every culture. Here are some other examples of epic poetry.

*Nibelungenlied* (c. 1200). This anonymous German epic recounts a story from the war between the east German Burgundians and the central Asian Huns in the fifth century.

*Omeros* (1990), by Derek Walcott. The Nobel Prize-winning poet retells the story of the *Odyssey* through West Indian eyes. The Caribbean island of St. Lucia reveals itself as a main character, and the poem itself is an epic of the dispossessed.

*Paterson* (1946–1958), by William Carlos Williams. This five-book serial poem was one of the first to redefine the epic, concerning itself with the city of Paterson, New Jersey, and examining modernization and its effects.

*The Ring Cycle* (1848–1874), by Richard Wagner. This cycle of four operas by the German composer is based on events from Norse sagas and the *Nibelungenlied*. The cycle is designed to be performed over the course of four nights, and the full performance takes about fifteen hours.

*The Song of Roland* (c. 1150). This anonymous French poem commemorates an eighth-century battle in the Pyrenees Mountains between Charlemagne's French army and the Muslim Saracens.

nence, Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, in numerous forms on a tremendous range of issues.

**Paradise Lost** Soon after Milton's death, *Paradise Lost* began to draw increased attention and praise from such critics as John Dryden, who considered Milton an epic poet comparable in stature to Homer and Virgil. With the notable exception of Samuel Johnson, who dismissed "Lycidas" as cold and mechanical and *Paradise Lost* as stylistically flawed, critics throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries upheld Milton's achievement for various reasons: William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley considered *Paradise Lost* a precursor of Romanticism, ennobling Satan as a tragic rebel; William Wordsworth hailed Milton's adoption of libertarian ideals; and Ralph Waldo Emerson praised the poet's infusion of private passion into universal themes.

In the 1920s, a group of critics, led by American poet T. S. Eliot, began to attack what they perceived as the wooden style and structure of Milton's epic. Eliot, while conceding Milton's talent, lamented his influence on later poets, who, he argued, often created tortuously labored, rhetorical verse in imitation of the earlier poet. But Milton's reputation again rose in the 1940s as critics

discovered his previously neglected prose, which in its emphasis on freedom had particular resonance in the World War II era. Furthermore, because of the influential scholarship of such essayists as Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis, Milton's epic poetry was once again regarded as masterly in its breadth and complexity, and today is considered among the finest in human history.

### Responses to Literature

1. Today, changing one's mind on an issue, as Milton did regarding the monarchy, is commonly seen as "flip-flopping," or a sign of intellectual weakness. Do you agree? Can changing one's mind on an issue indicate the ability to learn from further experience or information, or is sticking to one's original opinion a sign of strength of character? Write an essay that outlines your opinions.
2. Milton's portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is compelling and complex. Like most good literary villains, Satan is someone readers can almost sympathize with, despite themselves. After reading selections from *Paradise Lost*, try to think of other villains from films and movies who are similarly complex. Do you sympathize with these "bad guys" in some ways? Why? Does your reaction to them make them more effective as villains? How? Write an essay in which you define what makes a "good" bad guy.
3. In his famous anticensorship work *Areopagitica*, Milton famously wrote: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercized and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat." Censors, in Milton's time and now, argue that they are attempting to protect people from dangerous material. Review the quote above in context. What, exactly, is Milton arguing? What is the "immortal garland" he is referring to? Do you agree with Milton's position, or do you think some written material is indeed too dangerous for public distribution?

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## Yukio Mishima

BORN: 1925, Tokyo, Japan

DIED: 1970, Tokyo, Japan

NATIONALITY: Japanese

GENRE: Fiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Confessions of a Mask* (1949)

*The Sound of Waves* (1954)

*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956)

*A Misstepping of Virtue* (1957)

*Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* (1966)

### Overview

Considered one of the most provocative and versatile modern Japanese writers, Yukio Mishima is known for the unorthodox views expressed in his fiction as well as for his eccentric personal life. His works often reflect a preoccupation with aggression and violent eroticism.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Dark Childhood** Mishima was born in Tokyo, where his father was a senior government official. His paternal grandmother, Natsu, was obsessively protective and would not allow Mishima to live on the upper level of



Yukio Mishima Yukio Mishima, photograph. AP Images.

their house with his parents; instead, she kept him confined to her darkened sickroom until he reached the age of twelve. Perhaps because of this extreme isolation, Mishima had difficulty developing social relationships as a youth.

In his autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima gives an uninhibited account of his struggles to come to terms with these inclinations and recalls that since childhood his “heart’s leaning was for Death and Night and Blood.” Several critics have referred to this statement as an apt summary of Mishima’s literary aesthetic, pointing to a tendency in both his personal life and his fiction to treat violence and death as sacred events. This passion and violence, which was characteristic of Mishima’s personal life, is also conveyed throughout his fiction.

**Early Writing Career** Whatever the effect of his unconventional childhood, Mishima did well at the elite Peers School, belonging to a literary society there that was heavily influenced by the Japanese Romantic movement. After secondary school, Mishima passed easily into Tokyo University, where he studied law. Despite the fact that he was of age to be called for military service during the Pacific conflicts of World War II, Mishima escaped serving as a result of misdiagnosed tuberculosis. Ironically, for a man who was later to die wearing a uniform,

Mishima admitted to having been relieved at his escape from the military. Mishima’s career as a writer officially began soon afterward.

Mishima began writing stories in middle school, and in 1941, when he was sixteen, his short fiction piece “Hanazakari no mori” was published in the small, nationalist literary magazine *Bungei Bunka*. “Hanazakari no mori” focuses on the aristocracy of historical Japan and displays the early development of Mishima’s acrid literary perspective. Many critics were impressed with the maturity of Mishima’s style and voice in this work, and Zenmei Hasuda, a member of the *Bungei Bunka* coterie, encouraged Mishima to approach the prominent intellectuals of a group of Japanese Romanticists known as the *Nihon-Roman-ha*. Many tenets of this group’s doctrine mirrored Mishima’s personal convictions, and he was particularly fascinated by their emphasis on death and violence. Stressing the “value of destruction” and calling for the removal of party politicians in an attempt to preserve the cultural traditions of Japan, the *Nihon-Roman-ha* had a profound influence on Mishima.

His first collection of stories, *A Forest in Full Flower*, appeared in 1944 when the literary establishment was more concerned with the war effort than with reviewing new works by unknown authors. Even so, *Forest*, a rather precious and self-consciously literary example of the Japanese Romantic school, sold out its first edition soon after publication. Mishima’s other stories and novellas from the early postwar period, *The Middle Ages* (1945), *A Tale at the Cape* (1947), and his first novel, *Thieves* (1948), also revel in a typically Romantic mixture of elements, among the most important being physically attractive young lovers; beautiful, youthful death; and the sea. These early elements remain constant throughout Mishima’s career, although in his later stages they were often reworked with various degrees of irony.

**Philosophy and Politics** After receiving a law degree from Tokyo University in 1947, Mishima accepted a position with the Finance Ministry of Japan. He resigned within his first year, however, in order to devote himself entirely to writing. The extraordinary success of *Confessions of a Mask* solidified Mishima’s reputation as an important voice in Japanese fiction, and his subsequent endeavors in literature and drama were greeted with high critical acclaim. He received numerous literary awards and three nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Throughout his adult life, Mishima was disturbed by what he felt was Japan’s “effeminate” image as “a nation of flower arrangers.” He became increasingly consumed by a desire to revive the traditional values and morals of Japan’s imperialistic past and was vehemently opposed to the Westernization of his country. His ensuing works further reflect both his political orientation and his personal philosophy of “active nihilism,” which regards self-sacrifice as an essential gesture in achieving spiritual fulfillment. In affirmation of these personal convictions, Mishima, in

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mishima's famous contemporaries include:

- Kobo Abe** (1924–1993): A Japanese writer whose works have been compared to those of Franz Kafka.
- Leon Uris** (1924–2003): An American writer who produced numerous historical fiction and spy novels.
- Flannery O'Connor** (1925–1964): An American novelist and short-story writer often likened to William Faulkner.
- Sam Peckinpah** (1925–1984): An American film director well known for his innovative and explicit depictions of violence.
- Richard Burton** (1925–1984): A Welsh film actor nominated for seven Academy Awards.
- Rod Serling** (1924–1975): An American screenwriter best known for his work on the TV series *The Twilight Zone*.
- Leo Esaki** (1925–): A Japanese physicist who won the 1973 Nobel Prize in Physics and has contributed to technological development through his work for Sony and IBM.

1970, committed *seppuku*, a traditional Japanese form of suicide by disembowelment.

### Works in Literary Context

Mishima's work consistently lamented the barrenness of postwar Japan and offered fictional visions to substitute for the culturally and economically depressed reality of the country in the 1950s and 1960s. The settings and images in Mishima's writings were frequently taken from traditional Japanese culture but also occasionally from such Western writers as the Marquis de Sade.

**Eroticism and Apocalyptic Visions** In *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima first begins to explore the conflict between the disappointing real world and a fantasy world characterized by eroticism, violence, and beauty. This theme remained constant both in Mishima's life and in his art. Mishima also displayed an interest in imminent apocalypse and violence. His 1962 novel *Beautiful Star* is a meditation in the form of a science fiction novel on the potential for worldwide destruction. *Towing in the Afternoon* (1963) continues the themes of violence and apocalypse, but on a more personal level, tells the story of a group of precocious sub-adolescent boys who murder a sailor in order to "give him a chance to be a hero again." The novel also includes scenes of voyeurism and an implicit criticism of postwar Japanese materialism, themes that surface in later Mishima works.

**Nihilism** During the last four years of his life, Mishima concentrated on his tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*, made up of four novels in which Mishima attempted to

sum up both his entire philosophy of life and his view of the history of modern Japan. Each novel can be read on its own, but they are also woven together through an explicitly fantastic device: Mishima's own interpretation of the theory of reincarnation. According to this theory, a young man named Kyoaki who appears in the first novel (and dies at the end), is reincarnated in the next novel. In the final novel's last page, the main character confronts the fact that all he has believed in, not only the reincarnation but the sense of intensity that believing in reincarnation has brought to him, has been fantasy. The novel's last lines speak of an empty, sunny garden which, combined with the ironic title of *The Sea of Fertility* (which refers to an arid "sea" on the moon), suggests that Mishima's final vision of Japan was of a barren wasteland where neither fantasy nor transcendence can exist.

In regards to his nihilism, Mishima is not alone among modern Japanese writers. Kawabata Yasunari, Abe Kobo, and Kenzaburo Oe, among others, have all shown the bleakness of the postwar period at the same time as they document characters seeking escape from this bleakness. But Mishima is perhaps the most thoroughgoing in his nihilism. Despite the fact that he himself organized a right-wing group and died shouting "Long Live the Emperor," the final message of his fiction seems to suggest that even ideology offers no ultimate refuge.

**Continued Influence** Mishima's work is no longer as popular as it was during his life, but it also seems certain that it will no longer be dismissed for reasons of politics or even national embarrassment. He remains securely well known in the West, and even the younger generation of Japanese citizens is acquainted with several of his titles. An American director, Paul Schrader, has made a biographical film entitled *Mishima* (1985), and in 1993 the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's American production of Mishima's play, *Madame de Sade*, drew rave reviews.

### Works in Critical Context

Often overshadowed by his dramatic personal life, Mishima's fiction eludes easy critical analysis. His sensational death by *seppuku* has prompted many critics to elicit biographical meanings from his works, and critics often place him among the Japanese "I-novelists," who wrote autobiography in the guise of fiction. Other commentators note a distinct contradiction between Mishima's modern personal lifestyle and his literary aesthetic. Although critics have accused Mishima of self-indulgent prose, he is widely respected for his distinctive style, and most observers agree that he had made a significant contribution to world literature.

**Death in Midsummer and Other Stories** Known to the West primarily for his novels, Mishima also composed more than twenty volumes of short stories. Only one of these, however—*Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*—has been translated into English. Like his novels, this collection has garnered praise from both Eastern and Western

literary critics, and its stories display Mishima's concern with a wide range of themes. The themes of the ten pieces in *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* vary widely.

Perhaps the most critically discussed work in *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* is "Patriotism." Exemplifying Mishima's tendency to present eroticism and death with shocking objectivity, this piece is considered crucial in understanding Mishima's nihilistic creed. According to Lance Morrow, "Patriotism" reveals Mishima's mastery of "what Russians call *poshlust*, a vulgarity so elevated—or debased—that it amounts to a form of art." Based on the dual suicide of a young married couple during the 1936 Ni Ni Roku incident (in which a band of insurrectionists organized a rebellion against Japan's military forces on behalf of the emperor), the story centers on the union of the couple's physical and spiritual commitment to traditional ideals. Mishima himself described "Patriotism" as "neither a comedy nor a tragedy, but a tale of bliss." The couple's final sexual experience is treated as a prelude to their suicides, and the excruciating pain of the lieutenant's suicide is linked with erotic desire: "Was it death he was now waiting for? Or a wild ecstasy of the senses? The two seemed to overlap, almost as if the object of this bodily desire were death itself."

Other works in the collection, including "The Priest of Shiga Temple and His Love," "Onnagata," and Mishima's modern *Noh* play *Dojoji*, deal more specifically with the traditional character of Japan. Critics note Mishima's delicate handling of the theme of homosexual love in "Onnagata," which focuses on the lives of female impersonators in the traditional Kabuki theater. In "Onnagata," as in his other stories, Mishima examines discomfiting emotional states with cool and uninhibited candor that is often startling to his readers.

**Controversy** More than two decades after his death, Yukio Mishima is arguably still the most famous writer modern Japan has produced. The reasons for this fame are both complex and controversial. His critics may suggest that his notorious death by ritual suicide, which Mishima performed after having unsuccessfully called for the overthrow of the Japanese government, accounts as much for his renown as do his actual writings. His enthusiasts, whether in Japan or the West, do not dismiss the *seppuku* but dwell more on the brilliance of his style, the power of his imagination, and the fascination and variety of his themes—they include homosexuality, political terrorism, Zen, and reincarnation—all of which are in marked contrast to much of postwar Japanese fiction.

Whether his critics or his supporters are correct about the quality of either Mishima's oeuvre or his political ideology, the fact remains that he is the most internationally renowned of Japan's modern writers, a writer who has helped mold the Western imagination of Japan at the same time as one who continues to haunt the contemporary Japanese mind.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Throughout his writing career, Mishima demonstrated an interest in imminent apocalypse. Here are some other works that demonstrate a similar interest:

*On the Beach* (1957), a novel by Nevil Shute. This novel tells the story of survivors of a nuclear war who have a limited time to live because of the slow spread of radiation poisoning throughout the world.

*The Stand* (1978), a novel by Stephen King. In this epic tale of good versus evil, survivors of a plague travel across an America that has been decimated by disease and supernatural happenings.

*La Jetée* (1962), a film by Chris Marker. This short film tells the story of an experiment in time travel conducted after a nuclear war.

*The Day After* (1983), a made-for-TV movie directed by Nicholas Meyer. This movie depicts the impact of a major nuclear war upon people living in the American Midwest.

## Responses to Literature

1. The subject matter of Mishima's works can be shocking to many readers. What impact does this shock have on your reading of these works? In what ways does the shock enhance Mishima's messages, and in what ways does it diminish from the power of his stories?
2. Many critics believe that Mishima's books can be seen as autobiography in fictional form. What aspects of Mishima's life are apparent in his novels? In what ways are his works not autobiographical?
3. Mishima ended his life with a ritual suicide. Write an essay that argues either that he deserves to be better remembered for this act than for his works, or that his works deserve to be appreciated for their brilliance and power apart from his suicide.
4. Mishima has been noted for the nihilism present in many of his novels. Identify several scenes from his novels that depict this nihilism most directly and write a critical analysis of these scenes, focusing on their effectiveness in conveying the author's message and in convincing the reader to accept his philosophy of nihilism.

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## Gabriela Mistral

BORN: 1889, Vicuña, Chile

DIED: 1922, Long Island, New York

NATIONALITY: Chilean

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Sonnets on Death* (1914)

*Desolation* (1922)

*Felling* (1938)

### Overview

Gabriela Mistral, pseudonym of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, was the first Latin American author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature; as such, she will always be seen as a representative figure in the cultural history of the continent. Mistral's works deal with the basic passion of love as displayed in the various relationships of mother and child, man and woman, individual and humankind, soul and God.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Raised in the Mountains of Chile** Lucila Godoy Alcayaga was born on April 7, 1889, in the small town of Vicuña in the Andes mountains in Chile. She was raised by her mother and an older sister, both teachers. Her father abandoned his family when Lucila was three. Her mother was a central force in Mistral's attachment to family and homeland and a strong influence on her desire to succeed. Not less influential was her highly religious paternal grandmother, who encouraged the young girl to learn and recite by heart passages from the Bible.

**Careers: Educator and Poet** At the age of fifteen, Mistral began a successful career as a teacher and administrator, which enabled her to travel throughout Chile. This direct knowledge of her country, its geography, and its peoples became the basis for her increasing interest in national values, which coincided with the intellectual and political concerns of Latin America as a whole.



Gabriela Mistral *Mistral, Gabriela, photograph*. AP Images.

Mistral's love poems in memory of the dead won her literary recognition. The suicide of her fiancé in the early 1900s prompted Mistral to compose *Sonnets on Death* under the Mistral pseudonym. When she entered the poems in a writing contest in 1914, she earned first prize and instant fame.

During her years as an educator and administrator in Chile, Mistral was actively pursuing a literary career, writing poetry and prose, and keeping in contact with other writers and intellectuals. She published mainly in newspapers, periodicals, anthologies, and educational publications, showing no interest in producing a book. Her name became widely familiar because several of her works were included in a primary-school reader that was used all over her country and throughout Latin America.

In 1921 Mistral reached her highest position in the Chilean educational system when she was made principal of the newly created Liceo de Niñas number 6 in Santiago, a prestigious appointment desired by many colleagues. Now she was in the capital, in the center of the national literary and cultural activity, ready to participate fully in the life of letters. A year later, however, she moved to Mexico to work on reorganizing the country's rural education system and began her long life as a self-exiled expatriate.

**Desolation** In 1922, Mistral's first book of poems, *Desolation*, was published in New York, at the insistence of a group of American teachers of Spanish. Most of the compositions in *Desolation* were written when Mistral was working in Chile and had previously appeared in various publications. As such, the book is an aggregate of poems rather than a collection conceived as an artistic unit. Divided into broad thematic sections, the book includes almost eighty poems grouped under five headings that represent the basic preoccupations in Mistral's poetry, including motherhood, religion, nature, morality, love of children, and personal sorrow. This collection earned Mistral an international reputation.

**Tenderness** Mistral's stay in Mexico came to an end in 1924 when her services were no longer needed. Before returning to Chile, she traveled in the United States and Europe, thus beginning her life of constant movement from one place to another. Her second book of poems focuses on the theme of childhood. *Tenderness* (1924) is a celebration of the joys of birth and motherhood. While *Desolation* reflects the pain of a lost love and an obsession with death, *Tenderness* is a work of renewed hope and understanding. Infused with a decidedly Christian feeling, its poems evoke the poet's overriding desire to attain harmony and peace in her life.

**Reembracing Catholicism** Around 1925 Mistral returned to Chile and Catholicism. She entered the Franciscan Order as a laical member, not aiming to be a nun. As a member of the order, she chose to live in poverty, making religion a central element in her life. Religion for her was also fundamental to her understanding of her function as a poet.

When Mistral left Chile again for Europe, she served as secretary of the Latin American section in the League of Nations in Paris, where she met many writers and artists. In 1933, she moved first to Puerto Rico and then to Madrid, Spain, where she worked as a diplomat, but was forced to resign her position three years later for openly criticizing the Spanish government.

**Felling** Fourteen years passed between *Tenderness* and Mistral's next book, *Felling* (1938). Mistral includes poems inspired by the death of her mother, together with a variety of other compositions that do not linger in sadness but sing of the beauty of the world and deal with the hopes and dreams of the human heart. In solidarity with the Spanish Republic, she donated her author's rights for the book to the Spanish children displaced and orphaned by the Spanish civil war.

**The Nobel Prize and Later Life** During World War II, Mistral took the general consular post in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She was still in Brazil in 1945 when she heard on the radio that she had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She traveled to Sweden to be at the ceremony only because the prize represented recognition of Latin American literature. In 1946, she moved to the

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mistral's famous contemporaries include:

**Jose Maria Arguedas** (1911–1969): A Peruvian novelist, poet, and anthropologist; Arguedas brought indigenous issues and culture to the forefront through his writing.

**Dorothy Day** (1897–1980): This American journalist, social activist, and devout Catholic cofounded the Catholic Worker Movement, providing social services to those in need.

**Francisco Franco** (1892–1975): Franco was dictator of Spain from 1936 until his death; he became ruler after a failed coup that led to the Spanish civil war.

**Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945): Mussolini was the prime minister of Italy from 1922 to 1943. As leader of the National Fascist Party, he focused on nationalism at the expense of personal freedoms.

**Edna St. Vincent Millay** (1892–1950): An American poet, Millay was the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Poetry in 1923; she is well known for her lyric poetry and sonnets.

United States, which remained her home for the rest of her life.

Mistral's final volume of poetry, *Wine Press*, was published in 1954. Mistral had suffered the loss of her nephew and close friends. In addition, she had developed diabetes. Despite her losses and illness, the tone of this last collection is one of acceptance of death, marking her growing freedom from bitterness. Several critics have implied that this collection—the culmination of her literary career—is both a refinement of her simple and skillful writing style and a testament to her strengthened faith and ultimate understanding of God.

Late in 1956, Mistral was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. On January 10, 1957, Mistral died in a hospital in Hempstead, Long Island. After a funeral ceremony at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, the body of this pacifist woman was flown by military plane to Santiago, Chile, where she received the funeral honors of a national hero. Following her last will, her remains were eventually put to rest in a simple tomb in Monte Grande, the village of her childhood.

### Works in Literary Context

Gabriela Mistral is known as a poet who wrote about the enjoyment in the beauty of nature, with its magnificent landscapes, simple elements—air, rock, water, fruits—and animals and plants. Her love of nature was deeply ingrained from childhood and permeated her work with unequivocal messages for the protection and care of the environment.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Gabriela Mistral examines the meaning of God in much of her poetry. Here are some other works on that theme:

- Gitanjali* (1913), a poetry collection by Rabindranath Tagore. The poems in this collection deal with a union with the "supreme," phrased in human, physical terms; Tagore won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, becoming the first Asian writer to do so.
- "Pied Beauty" (1918), a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. In this poem filled with assonance and alliteration, the poet praises God for all imperfect things.
- Songs of Life and Hope* (2004), poetry by Rubén Darío. This bilingual edition collects many poems by this Nicaraguan poet on such topics as transcending suffering, Christianity, and a strong connection to nature.
- Walking to Martha's Vineyard* (2003), poetry by Franz Wright. These poems examine life, renewal, and the narrator's relationship with both God and his own father.
- The Wild Iris* (1992), poetry by Louise Gluck. The poems in this collection, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, alternate between the voices of plants, and a dialogue with an unnamed god.

**Religious and Poetic Influences** For Mistral, the poetic word in its beauty and emotional intensity had the power to transform and transcend human spiritual weakness, bringing consolation to the soul in search of understanding. Her poetry is thus charged with a sense of ritual and prayer; poetry provides Mistral the strength of a religious, spiritual life dominated by a passionate love for all of creation. The spiritual character of her search for a transcendental joy unavailable in the world contrasts with her love for the materiality of everyday existence. Her poetic voice communicates these opposing forces in a style that combines musicality and harshness, spiritual inquietudes and concrete images, hope and despair, and simple, everyday language and sometimes unnaturally twisted constructions and archaic vocabulary. In her poetry dominates the emotional tension of the voice, the intensity of a monologue that might be a song or a prayer, a story or a musing.

Mistral's writings are highly emotional and impress the reader with an original style. Rhythm, rhyme, metaphors, symbols, vocabulary, and themes, as well as other traditional poetic techniques, are all directed in her poetry toward the expression of deeply felt emotions and conflicting forces in opposition. Love and jealousy, hope and fear, pleasure and pain, life and death, dream and truth, ideal and reality, matter and spirit are always competing.

### Works in Critical Context

Almost half a century after her death, Gabriela Mistral continues to attract the attention of readers and critics

alike, particularly in her country of origin. Her poetic work maintains its originality and effectiveness in communicating a personal worldview.

**A Voice for Latin America** Katherine Anne Mansfield writes that

Gabriela Mistral is a strange figure among the chattering Latin-American poets... in her we have the concentrated force of that humble, strong, enduring creature, the Spanish and Indian woman of the middle class and of the peasantry, the type that teaches, labors, suffers, prays, without audible protest or question. She has given speech to the accumulated sorrows of these inarticulate women. She asks their questions for them, she shouts their protests through a throat strained with the immensity of her utterance.

Chilean poet Francisco Aguilera has said that Mistral "has given new rhythms and harmonies to Latin-American Spanish. No one else has dared to use the language as she does."

**Felling** *Felling*, according to Sidonia Carmen Rosenbaum, "reflects the spiritual vicissitudes which attended her [Mistral] for nearly two decades. Its mastery, its sureness of style and precise choice of words reveal the mature artist who has gone through the bitter exercise of attaining that much-prized 'difficult simplicity.'" In *Tala*, Mistral's verse no longer lingers on the tragic; instead, it reflects a sense of redemption and deliverance. Rosenbaum asserts that the expressions in *Felling* are "less tortured."

In *Felling*, Mistral addresses her characteristic themes: maternity, childhood, death, and the destruction of land. But it is her nostalgia for the land and the people of America that is most striking. Rosenbaum states,

Her Americanism, in its richest and warmest sense, is patent here, not only in the section properly called 'America,' but in all those poems which sing, in one form or another, of its landscapes, its places, its flora, its fauna, its people, its heritage, its destiny.... There is an attempt—an ideal—to disregard and efface national boundaries and to fuse all into that 'heart-shaped' beautiful land (land of the Incas and of the Mayas, of the Quiches, the Quechuans and Aymarans) which is her America; an ardent wish to see those 'downtrodden racemes of sacred vine'—which are the Indians of old—restored to their pristine destiny.

### Responses to Literature

1. Gabriela Mistral chose to write under a pen name because she was well known professionally for her work in education. Why do you think Mistral might have decided to separate her professional self as a poet from her professional self as an educator?
2. Choose several of Mistral's poems that deal with the theme of nature and conservation. Write two or three paragraphs discussing how these poems are relevant today.
3. Chile's history during the twentieth century has been turbulent. Using the Internet and your library's resources, research its history during the period that

- Mistral chose to live abroad. Create a timeline outlining the major political events, and discuss as class why Mistral may have decided to live outside of her country.
4. One of the things that Mistral struggled with in her poetry was reconciling personal fulfillment with the will of God. Do you think humans have free will, or do you think our future is determined in advance? Explain your position in a small group.
  5. Motherhood is a common theme in Mistral's poetry. Read "Fear" and discuss the conflict presented in the poem. What is Mistral's message about motherhood in this poem?

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## Thomas Mofolo

BORN: 1875, Khojane, Basutoland (now Lesotho)

DIED: 1948, Teyateyaneng, Lesotho

NATIONALITY: Basotho, Lesotho

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Traveller of the East* (1907)

*Pitseng* (1910)

*Chaka* (1925)

### Overview

Thomas Mofolo is considered the first great author of modern African literature. Written in the Sesotho language, his three novels are concerned with the radical

effect of Christian teachings on traditional African society. His fame is largely attributable to the last of his three published works, *Chaka* (1925), a narrative written in Sesotho and based on the life of the Zulu king Shaka, who lived from 1788 to 1828.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**From Student to Teacher** Mofolo was born in Kojane, Basutoland (now Lesotho), a small country surrounded by the Republic of South Africa, on December 22, 1876. The third son of Christian parents, he was educated at local religious schools and then sent to Morija to work as a houseboy for the Reverend Alfred Casalis, who headed the Bible school, printing press, and the book depot there. In 1894 Casalis enrolled Mofolo in the Bible School, and two years later Mofolo entered the Teacher Training College, earning a teaching certificate in 1899. He then began work as an interpreter at the printing press, but the operation was suspended during the South African War (also known as the Boer War or Anglo-Boer War), which began in October 1899 and continued until 1902. Mofolo studied carpentry for two years and taught at various schools until 1904, when he returned to Morija as secretary to Casalis and proofreader for the press.

Exposed to a variety of books at the Morija Book Depot, Mofolo read religious works, African and European histories, and novels by such writers as H. Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli. Several missionaries encouraged him to write works of his own, and his Christian allegory *Moeti oa bochabela* (translated as *The Traveller of the East*), published in 1907, became the first novel written in Sesotho. His next novel, *Pitseng*, the story of two exemplary youths inspired by an African Christian teacher, was published in 1910.

**Writing and Publishing Chaka** While working at the book depot, Mofolo also began research for a novel based on the life of the Zulu warrior-king Shaka. Traveling to Pietermaritzburg, the former Zulu capital Mgungundluvu, Mofolo visited Shaka's gravesite and collected historical data, recollections, and legends which had been passed on through oral literature. Mofolo submitted the *Chaka* manuscript to the Morija printers, but the missionaries were deeply divided over whether to publish the work. Despite acknowledgement of the novel's extraordinary qualities, those who opposed it cited their fear that the novel's depiction of traditional Africa would entice the indigenous reader to return to a non-Christian way of life. After a campaign by supporters and the excision of some material, *Chaka* was finally published in 1925.

**Life After Writing** Discouraged by the missionaries' qualms about publishing *Chaka*, Mofolo left for South Africa and gave up writing. For several years, he held different jobs. He worked as a recruiter and labor agent for diamond mines, sugar plantations, and large farms. For a time he managed a postal route, and he later ran a

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Mofolo's famous contemporaries include:

- Gertrude Stein** (1874–1946): An American expatriate writer who lived and worked in France for most of her life, Stein contributed to the development of modern art and literature.
- Winston Churchill** (1874–1965): British politician who led Great Britain during World War II.
- Thomas Mann** (1875–1955): German writer and social critic who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929.
- D. W. Griffith** (1875–1948): Pioneering film director best known for his 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*.
- Pancho Villa** (1878–1923): Mexican general who led the first successful popular revolution of the twentieth century.
- Upton Sinclair** (1878–1968): American author whose novel *The Jungle* contributed to the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act in 1906.

trading store. In 1933 Mofolo returned to his homeland and purchased a large farm from a white landowner. The sale violated the Natives Land Act of 1913, which prohibited blacks from owning or leasing land outside of the so-called Native Reserves, and the government seized the property. In 1940 the ailing and impoverished Mofolo retired, living on a small pension. He suffered a stroke in 1941, from which he never fully recovered, and died on September 8, 1948, at Teyateyaneng, Lesotho.

### Works in Literary Context

*Chaka*, Mofolo's most highly regarded work, is a fictionalized account of the Zulu leader Chaka (Shaka). The novel is often interpreted as a depiction of the negative moral consequences of paganism unchecked by Christian ethics. At the same time, respect for traditional African customs and beliefs pervades the work, especially in the heroic portrayal of the Zulu king Chaka. This respect caused missionary publishers to suppress Mofolo's manuscript until thirteen years after its completion. Today the novel is considered an epic tragedy of literary and historical significance and has served as the model for numerous subsequent works about Chaka, one of the most celebrated legendary figures in African literature.

**Stylistic Elements in Chaka** *Chaka* is not a historical novel in the true sense, as many commentators have claimed; the rise and fall of the historical Chaka is used only as a point of departure. The work is a romance that has connections with various oral and modern literary genres, such as the folktale, legend, fable, saga, fantasy, and myth. There are allegorical features as well. By con-

trasting oral traditions and legends with historical basis and fictitious elements and characters, Mofolo adds his unique style and poetic prose to this literary epic.

Mofolo employed several diverse stylistic elements in *Chaka*. He used the rhythm and narrative devices of African praise poems, which were performed to honor Bantu monarchs; the didactic elements of African oral narratives, which traditionally served as vehicles for moral instruction; and biblical terminology, which reflected his missionary schooling. Because the novel form is not intrinsically African, Mofolo also utilized some of the conventions of the Western novel. He combined these various stylistic forms throughout *Chaka*, shifting from one to another when appropriate for dramatic or thematic emphasis.

Mofolo's use of witch doctors in the novel demonstrates the extent to which these various traditions are skillfully synthesized. Essential to the portrayal of Chaka's drive for power, the role of the witch doctor has been interpreted as a literal commentary on good and bad witch doctors in the tribal community; a symbolic revelation of Chaka's personality traits and true desires reminiscent of the witches in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; and an allegorical rendering of a Mephistophelean devil with whom Chaka makes a pact.

*Chaka* demonstrates Mofolo's respect for Chaka and traditional African ways of life, unlike the negative depictions of these subjects by white historians. For this reason, Mofolo has profoundly influenced such African authors as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Abdou Anta Ka, and Djibril Tamsir Niane, whose works go beyond his novel in celebrating Chaka's military and political genius.

### Works in Critical Context

Thomas Mofolo is the most important African writers of the first quarter of the twentieth century. He still ranks with African Nobel laureates Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, and Najib Mafuz, and with others who are equally famous such as S. E. K. Mqhayi, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, André P. Brink, and Breyten Breytenbach. The early translation of *Chaka* into English and French spread Mofolo's fame as much as it did that of the Zulu king (although not at home) and led to a flood of dramatic works on the historical Shaka by Francophone writers in West Africa.

**Interpretations of Chaka** *Chaka* has been called by many critics a masterpiece of world literature. Regarded by contemporary reviewers as an "Africanized" Christian tract, the novel has more recently been assessed as a sophisticated fusion of Christian philosophy, African praise-poetry and myth, and Western literature.

There are many Christian readings of *Chaka* as an illustration of the battle between good and evil. In such interpretations, Chaka's death at the hands of his brothers is considered just punishment for his sinful paganism. Many critics, however, note that much of the so-called

Christian morality in the novel is in fact based on African traditions in which nature, the tribal community, and the gods are indivisible. Chaka's illegitimacy, for example, is fateful according to this tradition because it opposes tribal law, a law established before the introduction of Christianity to Africa. Similarly, Chaka ensures his destruction when he murders his mother, which breaks the ultimate taboo against shedding the blood of kin.

Ben Obumselu contends that a critical reading of the work as Christian morality cannot sufficiently account for the novel's complexity, which is most apparent in the portrayal of Chaka's psychological development. This careful attention to the events of Chaka's early childhood and his reaction to them does not excuse his behavior. However, it provides an explanation for his actions that goes beyond that of a simplistic pagan symbolism promoted by those who read the novel as a Christian allegory.

Several critics have also commented on the sympathetic nature of Mofolo's eulogy for Chaka and the Mazulu at the end of the novel. Daniel P. Kunene, for instance, believes that the passage reveals Mofolo's conscious or unconscious loyalty to Sesotho culture and its traditions of heroism and virility. Albert S. Gerard similarly considers the eulogy a passage wherein Mofolo sets aside religion to reflect on the Mazulu empire, pondering the "past greatness of his race and its present subjugation."

A challenging new interpretation of *Chaka* has come from Kwame Ayivor, who contends that Mofolo has adapted the *imbongi*, or African praise song, in a way that allows him simultaneously both to praise and to denigrate his protagonist: "By creating this disparity between the traditional voice of praise and the concealed anti-legendary tone bent on subverting the voice of the traditional *imbongi*, Mofolo introduces a dialectical battle between the two versions of *Chaka* from the beginning of the novel.

However one interprets Mofolo's *Chaka*, it remains one of the most important works by an African writer of the early twentieth century.

**Reactions to Chaka** When *Chaka* appeared in December 1925, it divided its readers into two camps, as it had the Morija missionaries before publication. Between 1926 and 1928, eight letters from readers appeared in *Leselinyana*. The readers' reaction was three-fold: admiration, rejection, and puzzlement. Their admiration was based on the composition, stylistic grandeur, character depiction, and overall merit of the work as fiction. Rejection—although voiced by only one highly outspoken reader, N. R. Thoahlane, who called the work "*chefo*" (poison)—was on moral grounds. The puzzlement was elicited by the combination of history and fiction in the work. Some readers were able to accept the license Mofolo took with actual events. Others pointed critically to the historical inaccuracies in the novel.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Mofolo's novels are all concerned with the effects of European colonists and Christian missionaries on traditional African society. Here are some other works with similar concerns:

*Mhudi* (1930), a novel by Solomon Plaate. This historical novel depicts the attempts of an African tribe and a group of Boers to attain their freedom.

*Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), a novel by Alan Paton. This novel, centered around a black Anglican priest from South Africa, explores various themes in the development of South African apartheid, including the breakdown of traditional tribal communities.

*Things Fall Apart* (1958), a novel by Chinua Achebe. This novel traces the influence of British colonialism and Christianity on a traditional African community by telling the story of a leader of a Nigerian village.

*Nervous Conditions* (1988), a novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga. This novel explores clashes between traditional African cultures and the cultures of the Western colonial powers by telling the story of a young black girl living in a small Rhodesian village.

Another group of readers objected to the implied offense to the Zulu crown in Mofolo's novel and asked whether it was necessary to humiliate the great Shaka to such an extent. Scholars have speculated as to whether the negative portrayal of the Zulu hero could have its origins in an antipathy that Mofolo had toward him because of the suffering of the Basotho people during the Difaqane, the wars of destruction the historical Shaka brought over southern Africa from about 1821 to 1833. Daniel P. Kunene concludes in his *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sesotho Prose* (1989): "As things now stand, Mofolo's 'purpose in writing this book' must of necessity, forever remain a matter of conjecture, like 'the great mysteries' of Chaka's life which are 'beyond the people's understanding.'"

### Responses to Literature

1. Mofolo's main novel features Chaka (Shaka) as the main character. What are the dangers of using such a figure? What are the advantages?
2. Mofolo struggled for thirteen years to get his novel *Chaka* published. Use the Internet and your library's resources to determine if present-day authors face the same kinds of difficulties or censorships. How are these censorships similar to or different from that of Mofolo's?

3. In Mofolo's time, people primarily learned about local customs and historical figures from literature. Today, the Internet gives people easier access to this kind of information. Use the Internet to locate information about Shaka, and write a short character sketch of this figure.
4. Mofolo's writings concentrate on the problems faced by Africans both before and during European colonialism. Write an essay discussing the effects of colonialism on African countries.

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## Molière

BORN: 1622, Paris, France

DIED: 1673, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

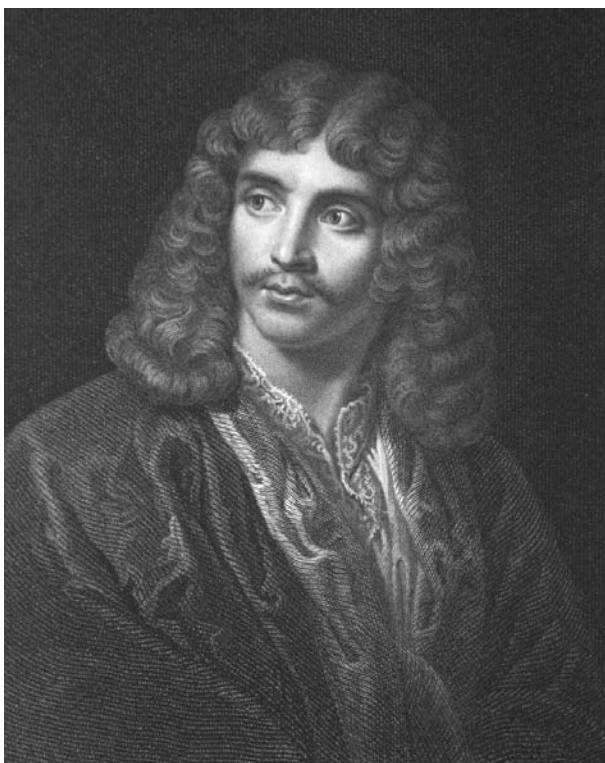
GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The School for Husbands* (1661)

*Tartuffe* (1664)

*The Misanthrope* (1666)



Molière Moliere, engraving. The Library of Congress.

## Overview

With such satirical masterpieces as *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*, Molière elevated French comedy. He established comic drama as a genre equal to tragedy in its ability to depict human nature, thereby changing both the focus and purpose of comedy. Though condemned by court and church officials during his career, Molière is widely recognized today as one of the most influential playwrights in world literature. His satirical denunciation of hypocrisy, vice, and foolishness, for example, became the inspiration for many of the greatest works of the English Restoration dramatists.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Childhood of Promise in a Prosperous Merchant Family** Born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin on January 15, 1622, in Paris, Molière was the eldest child of a prominent family of merchant upholsterers. When Molière was ten years old, his mother died, and his father soon remarried and moved his family to a house located in the cultural and social center of Paris. Molière was sent to the Jesuit College of Clermont, an outstanding school attended by children of prosperous families, before beginning to study law in Orléans. In the meantime, Molière's father had purchased the mostly honorary office of valet and furnisher to the king. In 1637, he obtained

hereditary rights to the position for Molière, who took the oath of office. In 1641, Molière became a notary. Given his family background, his education, his profession, and his future court position, Molière's future seemed promising.

**The Overwhelming Lure of the Theater** When the young Molière met actress Madeleine Béjart, his destiny was forever changed. In 1643, he renounced his court position, abandoned his social status, and risked damnation from the clergy in order to become an actor. Around this time, he started calling himself Molière and, along with Béjart, her brother and sister, and nine other actors, formed a theatrical company, which Molière managed. After renting a theater, the members of the troupe began producing their own plays in early 1644. Their venture was unsuccessful, and their financial condition so dismal, that Molière was twice imprisoned for debt and had to be rescued by his father.

In 1646, Molière, the Béjart siblings, and several other actors set out on a tour of the French provinces. During the next twelve years, Molière learned not only the methods required to be a successful actor, producer, and manager, but also the skills necessary to write farcical sketches before progressing to full-length plays. Throughout his time in the provinces, Molière proved a gifted leader whose energy and self-discipline reflected his commitment to the theater.

**Back to Paris** On October 24, 1658, Molière and his troupe of actors were prepared to make an impression on Paris with a performance at the Louvre before the young King Louis XIV, his brother "Monsieur" Philippe, and the court. Although the king was uninterested in their major play, a tragedy by Pierre Corneille, he found Molière's farce entertaining. As a result, the troupe was allowed to play at the royal Petit-Bourbon Theater, where they shared performance days with the Italian Comedians. Because they were under the patronage of Philippe, Molière's troupe was called the "troupe de Monsieur," the Monsieur's troupe. Young King Louis's interest in Molière would prove pivotal to the playwright in the future.

Though based on Italian comedies and farces, Molière's plays were superior in language, plot inventiveness, and character depiction. As the king showed more and more appreciation for Molière's comedies, the Monsieur's troupe began to revive some of the earlier full-length plays Molière had written while in the provinces. In 1659, Molière debuted his first comedy of manners, *The Affected Young Ladies*, which satirizes the affectations of Parisian society, followed by *Sganarelle*, a complicated story of love and misunderstanding, which became a favorite of King Louis.

**The King's Entertainment** Never one to conceal his disdain of hypocrisy—as evidenced by his satirical dramas—Molière made many enemies throughout his

career. Fortunately, his genius earned him friends who would defend him, including King Louis himself. Louis was a powerful and imposing force in French history. He reigned for more than seventy years and centralized the government firmly under his control. He famously remarked: "L'état, c'est moi" ("I am the state"). He was known both as the Sun King and Louis the Great. Jealous of both the king's approval and the public's appreciation of the Monsieur's troupe, rival theatrical companies united and, in 1660, succeeded in having Molière's theater demolished without notice, supposedly because it impeded construction on the Louvre. This event prompted King Louis to permit Molière's actors to use the theater of the Palais Royal, where Molière's company remained for the rest of his life. It was there that Molière staged the first of several comic ballets, which was presented as entertainment in the king's honor. From then on, Molière spent a great deal of time writing for various court entertainments, creating works that critics feel do not live up to the dramatist's potential; without the king's favor, Molière would have been in financial trouble in the years to come.

**Troubling Times** When he was forty, Molière married Armande Béjart, the twenty-year-old sister of Madeleine Béjart. The union proved miserable for Molière; fortunately, he was able to channel his discontent into writing. Without question, Molière's unhappy marriage is reflected in *The School for Wives* (1662), a play about a middle-aged man who attempts to create a chaste wife by raising her from girlhood in complete innocence. The drama was his greatest commercial success; however, the more successful Molière became, the more fervently his enemies worked to destroy his career.

Quick to find parallels between *The School for Wives* and the playwright's life, Molière's detractors accused him of incest, called him a cuckold, and proclaimed him a godless man. All were insults Molière and his friends refuted in a 1663 series of essays, poems, and plays. Inevitably, the incessant contempt began to affect Molière's work. In 1664, for example, he was forbidden to perform *Tartuffe*, the story of a pious hypocrite, because of religious fanatics at court. The play was not approved until 1670, five years after Molière had been forced to withdraw another one of his works, the drama *Don Juan*.

**Darker Days** In 1666, Molière's troupe performed *The Misanthrope*, generally considered his critical masterpiece despite its unenthusiastic reception at the time it appeared on stage. Focusing on an honest, outspoken man in a dishonest society, the play parallels Molière's own difficulties with censorship and social persecution. By this time, Molière's personal problems were mounting: His father's business was in trouble, his marriage had deteriorated, and his health was declining. Still, he continued to produce plays.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Molière's famous contemporaries include:

- Benedictus de Spinoza** (1632–1704): Among the most important philosophers in the seventeenth century, Spinoza was a rationalist who spoke against sensory perception as a way to acquire knowledge.
- Blaise Pascal** (1632–1662): This French scientist and mathematician is credited with inventing the first digital calculator.
- Jean Racine** (1639–1699): Racine, a master of French tragedy, followed the neoclassical tragic form—five acts in which the action took place within a single day and was usually restricted to one location.
- Pedro Calderón de la Barca** (1600–1681): Along with playwright Lope de Vega, Calderón dominated Spain's golden age of theater.
- John Bunyan** (1628–1688): An English preacher, Bunyan is the author of the famous Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*.
- Shah Jahan** (1592–1666): During Jahan's reign (1628–1658), the Mongol Empire reached its height in prosperity and luxury, best exemplified by the construction of the Taj Mahal.

Molière faced even more adversity in the last few years of his life. In 1670, his father died in poverty, and, in 1672, a newborn son died. Molière himself was very ill and had to depend on doctors whom, as his plays reveal, he completely distrusted. Meanwhile, Molière's enemies in both court and clergy were at work, ensuring that he would no longer stage entertainments for the king. On February 17, 1673, Molière became ill onstage while playing the title role in *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673). Molière suffered from tuberculosis, a highly infectious disease—usually resulting in bleeding in the lungs—that was widespread but poorly understood in the playwright's time. Although Molière finished the performance, he died later that night. Even in death, Molière caused controversy: The clergy insisted that he not be buried in consecrated ground. Only when the king intervened was Molière given a quiet burial in Paris.

### Works in Literary Context

By establishing a serious, refined basis for comic drama, Molière changed the very essence of French comedy. As a result of his taking the comedy of manners to new heights of sophistication, Molière inspired such playwrights of the English Restoration as William Congreve and William Wycherley. Molière remains a popular figure in literature, as his plays continue to be performed throughout the

world, immortalizing not only the playwright himself, but also his most complex characters.

**Characterization** Most readers agree that Molière's strength as a playwright lies not in his plot development, but in his handling of diverse, insightful characters. By using a simpler language than other writers of tragedy or farce, along with depicting recognizable character types in ordinary situations, Molière attacks the hypocrisy and defects of society. Misanthropes, misers, foolish women, court flatterers—all are familiar character types in Molière's plays. Oftentimes, his plays present a specific character flaw taken to its extreme, as evidenced by Tartuffe's hypocrisy or the obsessive greed of Harpagon in *The Miser*. In ruthlessly deriding selected characters, Molière in essence scorns an entire social institution, as is the case with the medical profession in *The Imaginary Invalid*.

Intending to guide his audience to moral and social responsibility, Molière has his characters attempt to deny their flaws. In *The Misanthrope*, for example, Arsinoé, because she cannot admit her inability to attract men, presents herself as a paragon of piety. Arsinoé, however, is not the only character given to self-delusion in *The Misanthrope*. The suitors are so consumed by gossip that they never have time—nor the inclination—for self-reflection. Rather than discover why he loves Célimene so deeply, Alceste denies his love for her by pointing out and criticizing her appalling personality traits. More often than not, the characters in *The Misanthrope* conceal their own faults by criticizing others.

### Works in Critical Context

Regarded as more than the greatest writer of the French stage, Molière is extolled by critics of every century as the father of modern comic drama, whose most important innovation as a dramatist was elevating comedy to the seriousness of tragedy. Explaining Molière's significance as a literary figure in France, Margaret Webster, one of the twentieth century's most important women in theater, contributes the following to *Approaches to Teaching Molière's Tartuffe and Other Plays*: "In his own language he is as towering a figure as [William] Shakespeare is in ours." For nineteenth-century critic Henri Van Laun, Molière's reach extends beyond French literature in that "he is equal, if not superior, to any other writer of character-comedies on the ancient or modern stage."

**Condemned Works** Because his comedies were often extremely critical, Molière was frequently the source of controversy in French theater. Most critics agree that rather than seeking to destroy existing social structures, Molière was exposing hypocrisy, artificiality, and vice in French society with the hope that people would control and correct their behaviors. Certainly, because of possible repercussions, it was in Molière's best interests not to offend members of King Louis XIV's court and members of the clergy. Nonetheless, Molière's biting sarcasm

provoked the ire of such groups as clergymen and doctors. For instance, critic Harold C. Knutson observes that *Love Is the Doctor* (1665) is “a particularly biting commentary on doctors and doctoring,” because the doctors “drop the mask and betray their callousness . . . and contentiousness,” and that the doctors are concerned with rules and formalities instead of the well-being of their patients. Even more incendiary than *Love Is the Doctor* was *Tartuffe*, the story of a deceitful, manipulative spiritual adviser. This play resulted in demands not only for censorship, but also for excommunication of anyone who read, attended, or performed the play. Only with the king’s intervention—he was a quiet supporter of Molière—did Molière escape being executed for heresy.

**Beyond Moralizing** While modern scholars, like their predecessors, continue to seek ethical, philosophical, and religious messages in Molière’s comedies, critical interest has shifted away from simply evaluating his didactic and moral intentions. Instead, studies focus on the aesthetics of Molière’s comic technique. For example, some theater scholars call attention to the staging of Molière’s comedies in relation to historical relevance as well as theatrical spectacle. Furthermore, the universality of Molière’s characters has long been recognized; however, various critics, including James F. Gaines, emphasize the playwright’s use of paradox and ambiguity in his characterizations. Still other contemporary academics approach Molière’s drama through his use of language, often finding it to be the essence of his comedy.

**The Misanthrope** *The Misanthrope* premiered in 1666, with Molière himself playing one of the main roles. Although audience and critical reception during its initial run was not positive, scholarly analysis over the following centuries has placed the play among the author’s most important works. According to scholar Martin Turnell, “The *Misanthrope* in the seventeenth century was the connoisseur’s play and a contemporary described it with felicity as ‘une pièce qui fait rire dans l’âme’ [a piece that makes people laugh in the soul]. Its preeminence lies not in greater depth or profundity, but in a greater variety of tone, a wider social reference, more complex and more delicate shades of feeling. It is one of the most personal of Molière’s plays.” W. G. Moore describes it as “a masterpiece, of the same order as the *Divine Comedy* or *Don Quixote*. ”

## Responses to Literature

1. *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope* are plays that employ several devices of farce. What is farce? Identify the elements of farce found in these works and determine how they support the overall plot, characterization, and meaning of each. How do you think physical action can parallel meaning?
2. According to Molière, what is a misanthrope? Make a list of evidence from *The Misanthrope* to support his

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Molière wrote a series of comic ballets to present as entertainment for King Louis XIV. David Whitton has noted that because the development of this genre is closely linked to royal patronage, the works often offer a glimpse into the social and political situations of the times. Whether written to amuse or to offer social commentary, comic ballets such as the ones listed below have entertained audiences worldwide:

*El Güegüense o Macho Ratón* (seventeenth century), a drama by an unknown Nicaraguan author. A comedy of high culture now performed as a professional folkloric ballet, the characters in this work reject Spanish control in a mocking and creative way.

*The Limpid Stream, Op. 39: A Comedy Ballet in 3 Acts and 4 Scenes* (1935), a comic ballet by Dmitri Shostakovich. When ballet dancers from Moscow tour the rural Kuban region, the dancers and farmers discover how much they have in common.

*Coppelia* (1870), a ballet with music composed by Leo Delibes. Based on E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story “The Sandman,” this ballet about a toymaker who falls in love with a doll he creates is widely regarded as dance’s greatest romantic comedy.

definition. Next, make a list of characteristics that you believe a misanthrope has, formulate your own definition, and then compare your conception of a misanthrope to that of Molière.

3. Molière was a key figure in seventeenth-century French drama. Research other genres of French literature in the seventeenth century, such as poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose. Who are the key figures in each genre, and what are some of their major works? What general concerns and literary values characterize French literature of this period?
4. Compare the court of King Louis XIV to that of Charles I in England. Which had more influence on writers and artists? Why? What artists in the United States today are controlled by political or activist groups? Why do you think such organizations have power over artistic endeavors?

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## Michel de Montaigne

BORN: 1533, Chateau de Montaigne, France

DIED: 1592, Chateau de Montaigne, France

NATIONALITY: French

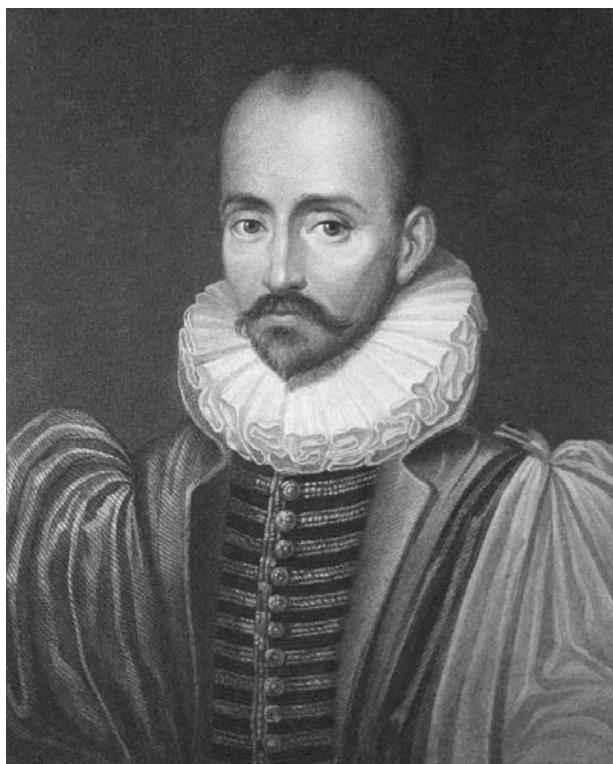
GENRE: Nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Essays* (1580)

### Overview

French author Michel de Montaigne, the inventor of the essay form as a literary genre, raised introspection to the level of art in his monumental *Essays* (1580). The French *essai* means an experiment, test, or attempt, and such was Montaigne's intention in his writing: to attempt to understand himself, and by extension, the human condition. In so doing, Montaigne extended his questioning



Montaigne Montaigne, photograph. The Library of Congress.

to the very limits of human knowledge. His sustained skepticism contributed to the development of what is today termed "critical thinking," at the heart of the humanities.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Well-Educated in Youth** Montaigne was born Michel Eyquem in 1533 at his family's estate in the district of Perigord, in the Gascony region of France. Although his forebears had long been bourgeois traders, in 1477 his great-grandfather had purchased the chateau of Montaigne, along with the right to add the noble title "de Montaigne" to the family name. Montaigne was the first in his family to drop the name Eyquem, shedding the last traces of his family's roots in commerce. His father, Pierre Eyquem, figures prominently in Montaigne's writing.

Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne took great care in planning his son's education. He sent his son to spend his infancy with peasant godparents, so the future lord of Montaigne might develop a sense of attachment to the lower classes. He also required that the household speak to the boy exclusively in Latin. At age six, Montaigne was sent to the finest school in Bordeaux. He completed its twelve-year curriculum in seven years. His activities after leaving the school are unclear, but it is thought that he studied law, possibly at Toulouse.

**Young Magistrate** In 1557, Montaigne became a councilor in the Parliament of Bordeaux. He remained a magistrate until 1570, and while he mentions these years infrequently in *Essays*, they had great impact on his life. Scholars have argued that Montaigne's legal training shaped the literary form of his writing by informing his method of analysis and exposition.

At this time, France was ruled by the Valois dynasty, Henry II (who reigned from 1547 to 1549), Charles IX (who reigned from 1560 to 1574), and Henry III (who reigned from 1574 to 1589). France went through a series of Italian wars through the 1550s, which the French lost but gained the influence of the Italian Renaissance. The Reformation became bigger and more bitter as Protestants (known in France as Huguenots) fought Catholics for power. The policy of the French monarchy was generally to suppress Protestantism at home. By the 1560s, the first of eight civil wars broke out in France, dubbed the Wars of Religion, over this divide.

During this period, Montaigne grew very close to a colleague in Parliament, Etienne de La Boetie, who came to be more important to Montaigne than anyone, and was the subject of his famous essay, "On Friendship." Their friendship was cut short, however, when La Boetie contracted an intestinal ailment. Montaigne hardly left his friend's bedside, even though both men feared that La

Boetie had the plague and might be contagious. La Boetie died in 1563. A few years later, Montaigne married Françoise de La Chassagne, whose father and brother held seats in Parliament. The couple had six daughters, but only one survived to adulthood.

**Began Writing Essays** At the request of his ailing father, Montaigne translated a theological treatise, *Liber Creaturarum*, by a fifteenth-century Spaniard, Raymond Sebond. The translation marked his first tangible step toward becoming a writer. During the Renaissance, translation was considered an appropriate training for literary endeavor. In 1568, Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne died, leaving his son as the new lord of Montaigne. At thirty-eight years of age, Montaigne surrendered his seat in Parliament, and retired to his estate, to what he hoped would be a life of quiet study and composition. He began the task of writing *Essays*, which would occupy him for the rest of his life.

Montaigne's *Essays* consists of three books and 107 chapters, which range in length from a few paragraphs to over a hundred pages. They treat myriad subjects, from the trivial to the profound—from the author's attitude toward radishes, to his sexual tastes, to his feelings about God. Montaigne's trademark thoughtful skepticism runs throughout the essays. The author took for his motto the words, *Que sais-je?* ("What do I know?").

**Diplomatic and Government Service** Montaigne composed the early chapters of *Essays* in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, in which the bodies of slain Huguenots in Paris were thrown into the Seine, turning it red with blood. During this time, he was called upon to act as a negotiator between Henri de Navarre, leader of the Protestant armies (and later King Henry IV of France), and Henri de Guise, the charismatic leader of the Catholic League. Amid his diplomatic and military service, Montaigne was made a Gentleman of the Bedchamber, an office that gave access to the king without requiring residence at court.

The first two books of *Essays* were published in 1580. Montaigne then set out on an extensive journey through France, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. He kept a private journal of his trip, which was rediscovered in 1770 and published in 1774 as *The Journal of Montaigne's Travels*. While still traveling, Montaigne learned to his dismay that he had been elected mayor of Bordeaux.

Montaigne tried to refuse the responsibility, but finally consented and arrived home after an absence of seventeen months. He served two terms as mayor, from 1581 to 1585, and promoted reforms on behalf of foundling children and female prisoners. In addition, he prevented the gentry of Bordeaux from gaining exemption from taxation. In 1588, on a secret mission to King Henry III from Henry of Navarre, he was detained by Protestants. A few months later, Montaigne found himself briefly imprisoned in the Bastille by the Catholics.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Montaigne's famous contemporaries include:

- Sir Philip Sidney** (1554–1586): English poet and courtier, who wrote *An Apology for Poetry* (1595).
- Sir Walter Raleigh** (1552–1618): English poet, courtier, and explorer of the New World. His poems include *The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd* (c. 1585).
- Pierre de Ronsard** (1524–1585): French "prince of poets," immensely popular in his time, and prominent in the canon today. His poems include "Hymne de la France" (1549).
- Torquato Tasso** (1544–1595): Italian poet, known for "Jerusalem Delivered" (1580), a depiction of the siege of Jerusalem during the First Crusade
- Christopher Marlowe** (1564–1593): English dramatist and poet; author of the poem "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" (c. 1590s).
- Queen Elizabeth I** (1533–1603): queen of England, 1558–1603, known as the Virgin Queen, daughter of King Henry VIII.
- Catherine de Médicis** (1519–1589): queen consort and regent of France; mother of French kings Francis II, Charles IX, and Henry III.

**Revised Essays** Despite the demands of public office, Montaigne did not abandon his literary endeavors. A second, expanded edition of *Essays* was published in 1582. For the next six years, Montaigne continued to make editorial changes to the existing chapters and to write new essays. In 1588, he combined both the revised and the new essays into a third edition, which would be the last published during his lifetime. Montaigne died at his home on September 13, 1592.

## Works in Literary Context

As a child, Montaigne received the careful attention of private tutors. The Latin works of the ancient Romans, such as Ovid, Virgil, and Plautus, constituted his pleasure reading. One of his favorite books was Seneca's *Epistles to Lucilius*, and the early chapters of his *Essays* cite and paraphrase it abundantly. With its lessons of self-mastery in the face of adversity, Seneca's Stoic philosophy must have seemed well suited to the times.

**Contending with the Classics** Seneca's epistles also influenced the literary form Montaigne was elaborating, for Montaigne expresses admiration for the epistolary form. On a more general level, *Essays* grew almost organically out of Montaigne's notes on Seneca—and, indeed, on many other books. The practice of marginalia (writing commentary in the margins) was an important factor

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The essay, the literary genre associated with Montaigne, is a powerful format for communicating ideas analytically and persuasively. The following are among the world's most famous essays.

*Moral Epistles* (64 B.C.E.), by Seneca the Younger. These letters by the ancient Roman philosopher-playwright were one of the inspirations for Montaigne's writings. "A Modest Proposal" (1729), by Jonathan Swift. In this satirical pamphlet Swift suggests that in tough economic times, the Irish should consider selling poor children to be consumed by the wealthy.

*Common Sense* (1776), by Thomas Paine. This pamphlet, one of the best-selling pieces of literature in eighteenth-century America, helped persuade Americans to revolt against British rule.

"Self-Reliance" (1841), by Ralph Waldo Emerson. This essay outlines many of the precepts of nineteenth-century Transcendental philosophy. Emerson encourages the reader to follow his or her own instincts and to appreciate the beauty of nature.

"Shooting an Elephant" (1936), by George Orwell. In this essay, a devastating critique of imperialism, Orwell recounts how he was forced to shoot an elephant in occupied Burma.

"Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (1962), by James Baldwin. In this essay, Baldwin eloquently analyzes race and religion in America.

shaping the genesis of his text. *Essays* resembles a compendium of ancient philosophy and history. Montaigne quotes and paraphrases such ancients as Plutarch, Aristotle, Cicero, and Caesar. He thus established the literary principle of the seventeenth century: respect for and imitation of the classics. However, Montaigne's references highlight discrepancies, rather than continuities, between these thinkers. The intellectual technique of weighing one idea or one author against another defines the essay as Montaigne invented it.

**Radical Skepticism** In *Essays*, Montaigne's literary and philosophical preoccupations converge. The unifying concept is honest introspection and self-discovery. Commentators assert that beyond Montaigne's egoism lies a higher purpose. Believing as he did that he, as one man, manifested within himself the quintessential humanity common to all people, Montaigne held that in seeking to understand his individual self, he was examining the universal traits of humanity. His approach is informal and meandering. He moves from one subject to another, following a train of thought or an association of ideas.

This rambling, intimate style and unpretentious manner foster a sense of camaraderie between writer and reader that largely accounts for the work's success.

Classical and contemporary quotations are liberally sprinkled throughout *Essays*, testifying to Montaigne's wide range of knowledge. Scholars have traced in his work the influence of a wide array of thinkers beyond Seneca, including Socrates, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. But by far the most consistent element of Montaigne's thought is Pyrronism, or radical skepticism. He holds that presumption blinds a thinker, making one too willing to think one knows what one does not know. He shares Socrates' belief that awareness of one's ignorance is the key to wisdom.

**The Subject of Self** The early chapters of *Essays* are similar to Renaissance miscellanies (a collection of literary works, originally of poems), a contemporary genre defined by its variety. But as his project developed, Montaigne departed from this model. His essays fall outside the literary conventions of his era, both because of their skepticism and their author's intention to compose a multidimensional self-portrait.

**Influence** The centrality that Montaigne accorded to the self earned him illustrious admirers and imitators. Countless writers and thinkers have been influenced by his ideas and his literary style, including Francis Bacon, William Shakespeare, René Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. One prominent detractor was the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who denounced Montaigne's decision to focus upon himself. He decried Montaigne's work as impious and vain, as well as intellectually specious in its meandering technique.

### Works in Critical Context

Montaigne's towering achievements—the invention of a powerful method of written expression, and the assertion of the personal perspective in literature—have fascinated critics for centuries. Critics have also long debated the ideas and opinions in Montaigne's most famous pieces—subjects such as friendship, religion, humanism, monarchy, the discovery of the New World, and the aptitudes of women. Ultimately, many conclude, it is not Montaigne's answers that matter, but his questions; not his precise philosophy, but his method of exploring it; not the conclusions he drew, but the self-examination he undertook.

**Essays** With *Essays*, scholars have carefully studied him from a stylistic viewpoint, considering him a pioneer of the essay form, specifically the genre of the personal essay. As Joseph Epstein expressed it in *Commentary*, Montaigne "put the capital I, the first person, into literature, and while he was at it also invented the essay." The self that Montaigne laid bare in his essays, although it contains numerous ambiguities and apparent contradictions,

affords an unusually complete and panoramic view of the individual soul.

The nature of Montaigne's self-representation within his essays has been studied by a number of critics. Hope H. Glidden in *Renaissance Quarterly*, for example, maintains that Montaigne's strategy was to warn his readers "that the man and his words are not one...the face of Montaigne is laid bare but its very openness cannot be taken at face value." Much of the scholarship in *Essays* is devoted to the discovery and acknowledgment of the many ambiguities and apparent contradictions within the text.

## Responses to Literature

1. Write an analysis of one or two of Montaigne's essays. What procedures does he use to explore a subject?
2. How does Montaigne's focus on self-knowledge enhance, or detract from, the persuasiveness of his arguments? Write an essay that explains your conclusions.
3. Consider the ways that Montaigne quotes from and refers to classical authors. What are his objectives in compiling and commenting on other works? Create a presentation that outlines your findings.
4. Scholars have debated the influence of numerous philosophers on Montaigne's thinking. Does he take a consistent philosophical stand throughout *Essays* or do his views evolve as the work progresses? Write an essay that outlines your argument.
5. Identify some instances where Montaigne violates literary conventions or expectations, especially when discussing controversial subjects. Explore the purposes, and the effects, of such transgressions in a paper.

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## Eugenio Montale

BORN: 1896, Genoa, Italy

DIED: 1981, Milan, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Cuttlefish Bones* (1925)

*The Customs House and Other Poems* (1932)

*Occasions* (1939)

*The Storm, and Other Poems* (1956)

*Miscellany*) (1962)

### Overview

Eugenio Montale, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1975, is considered one of the most important voices of modernism in twentieth-century poetry. His poetry, from the first publications in the 1920s to his complete works that appeared in 1981, is a touchstone for all those who seek to understand the potential and achievement of twentieth-century verse.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood on the Ligurian Coast** Montale was born in Genoa in 1896 into a wealthy family. He spent his childhood and early adult years in Genoa and in the Cinque Terre, a rugged coastal area south of the city, where his family had a summer residence. That Ligurian coast, with its then unspoiled beauty, and the Mediterranean Sea spreading out beneath the rocky cliffs, figure prominently in his first collection of poetry, *Cuttlefish Bones* (1925).



Eugenio Montale Keystone / Getty Images

Montale attended school until the age of fourteen, when poor health prevented further formal education. In 1915 Montale decided to dedicate himself to the study of bel canto (a style of operatic singing), but his musical career was cut short by the death of his maestro, Ernesto Sivori, in 1916. Music, within Montale's poetry, is not only incidental or thematic but functions as a constitutive element of his poetics and subsequent verse. Montale himself emphasized how music and poetry have an indissoluble tie between them.

**War and Its Aftermath** In 1917 World War I (which had been raging since 1914) intervened, and from 1917 to 1919 Montale served as a soldier, mostly in the Trentino region and in and around Genoa. Unlike some contemporary poets, whose poetry was heavily conditioned by wartime experiences, Montale did not incorporate many direct personal or collective references to those difficult times into his subsequent poetry. There is no doubt, however, that the war was a watershed for all Italian intellectuals and artists. For some, the destruction of the old order was cause for rejoicing; for others, the war was a cause for increased disorientation and somber reflection on what the future might bring.

After the war, Montale returned to his family home and continued to frequent the literary circles of Genoa and Turin, where he had already begun to develop friend-

ships. He was an autodidact (he never studied for a university degree), immersing himself in readings of philosophy, Italian classics, and an eclectic selection of foreign writers. In 1922 he met the antifascist intellectual Piero Gobetti, who was one of the most important influences on the diffident young poet and who published *Cuttlefish Bones*. Gobetti's open anti-D'Annunzianism (opposing the ideas of fascist poet Gabriele d'Annunzio), as well as his informed interest in the increasingly potent intellectual hegemony of Crocean idealism (based on the philosophy of liberal-thinker Benedetto Croce), fed strongly into Montale's own development.

The publication of *Cuttlefish Bones* established Montale as a poet worthy of serious critical attention. Contemporary critics praised it as an event of lasting importance that presented an authentically new voice. Rather than feelings about the war, Montale's poems in this collection reflect the harsh terrain of the Ligurian coast and the Mediterranean below, his beloveds, and the constant search for an escape from necessity.

**Journal and Newspaper Work** Upon leaving the military after World War I, Montale returned to Genoa, cofounded a short-lived literary journal in 1922, and began contributing poems, articles, and reviews to newspapers and magazines. After relocating to Florence, where he worked for the publisher Bemporad for a year beginning in 1927, he assumed the directorship of the Gabinetto Vieusseux Library, a position he held for a decade before being forced to resign due to his antifascist sympathies.

After his dismissal from the Vieusseux, Montale lived on translations and journalistic writing, and he continued to write poetry. During the years of World War II he led a relatively quiet, if troubled, existence in Florence, working primarily as a translator and as the poetry critic of *La fiera letteraria*. He joined the staff of a Milan daily paper, *Corriere della sera*, in 1948. During his career with *Corriere della sera*, Montale functioned as a literary editor and music critic and served in the latter capacity until his death.

The second major collection of Montale's poetry, *Occasions*, includes the poems of the 1925 volume as well as many new poems. In Italian, "occasions" signify not just occurrences or casual events but also rare moments of illumination and epiphany, literally "opportunities" that the poet re-creates in brief lyrical flashes. The poems of this period (1928–1940) are generally thought of as Montale's most hermetic, both in terms of their extreme thematic privacy and their formal compression. Not all contemporary critics were pleased with this new approach, however.

**Widespread Recognition** In 1956 Montale published his third major collection of verse, *The Storm, and Other Poems*. The verses in this collection are filled with his emotion toward the Mediterranean landscape. The thematic variety is matched by stylistic virtuosity as

Montale experiments with the sonnet form, the madrigal, and the prose poem, which points up the deep connection between prose and poetry that emerges more vividly in his collections that follow. The decades after the publication of *The Storm, and Other Poems* were filled with public recognition of Montale's work. In 1961 he was awarded honorary degrees from the Universities of Rome, Milan, and Cambridge; in 1967 he was named Senator for Life (an honorific membership in the Italian Senate). Yet, as the 1960s progressed (and following his wife's death in 1963), he became less and less involved in the social and literary circles of Milanese society in which he had formerly moved.

Italian culture and society both had been radically transformed in the postwar years, and poets were following new directions and seeking forms of expression totally unrelated to Montale's generation. The so-called neoavant-garde sought to sweep away ancient and more recent tradition alike, and Montale was in danger of becoming a sort of living relic. The surprise was enormous, therefore, when he published a hefty collection of new verse in 1971 under the title of *Satura*. Surprise modulated into something like astonishment when this work was followed by others. The "unprolific" poet whose production seemed destined to consist of three collections was a writer of great productivity in his old age. This new outpouring of work prompted the Nobel Prize committee to award him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1975.

Montale died on September 12, 1981, exactly a month before his eighty-fifth birthday. His long life was relatively uneventful on the surface, but his poetry is deeply reflective of the eventfulness and complexity of his inner life where he absorbed the trials, the lessons, and the continuing search for answers that characterize human experience. His is undeniably a modern voice, attuned to the times in which he lived and wrote, but it is also a voice with a timeless pitch, expressing the transcendent music of poetry. Unable to offer concrete solutions to existential and spiritual dilemmas, Montale's poetry nonetheless retains an abiding power in its formal beauty, its incisive and intelligent consciousness and conscience, and its commitment to the importance of the individual and to that which is unrepeatable in life and in art.

### Works in Literary Context

Montale's poetry affirmed a belief in human dignity and the ultimate value of existence, but it also expressed pessimism at the disparity between human spiritual aspirations and the reality of our condition. His existentially profound poetry is conveyed in deeply personal and impressionistic terms, in contrast to the embellished, formal style that predominated in Italy in the early decades of the twentieth century. According to Montale, "I wanted to free the music in words, apply them to reality,

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Montale's famous contemporaries include:

- Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945): Fascist statesman who led Italy from 1922 until the end of World War II.
- André Breton** (1896–1966): French writer who was one of the main founders of the surrealist movement.
- Henry de Montherlant** (1896–1972): French novelist and playwright noted for his nonconformism and controversial themes.
- Paul Éluard** (1895–1952): French poet who helped found the surrealist movement.
- William Faulkner** (1897–1962): American author who is widely regarded as one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century; he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949.
- Alfredo Bracchi** (1897–1976): Italian author who wrote popular song lyrics and movie scripts.
- Federico García Lorca** (1898–1936): Spanish poet and playwright who was killed at the beginning of the Spanish civil war.

and in transcending mere depiction, capture what is essential." Because of its subjectivity, Montale's verse often verges on impenetrable, leading some critics to label him a hermetic poet.

**Precursors and Influences** Montale completely absorbed the Italian lyric tradition, from Dante Alighieri to Petrarch to Giacomo Leopardi, and including Montale's immediate precursors: the *crepuscolari* (twilight poets) and futurists. His poetry further reveals the extraordinary importance of certain antimodels, especially Gabriele D'Annunzio and Benedetto Croce, whose art and philosophy, respectively, dominated Montale's formative years. Although, like T. S. Eliot—to whom his work has often been compared—Montale can be seen ultimately as a philosophical poet. He himself refused this label, insisting that he sought not to promote ideas but rather to seek knowledge, however partial, of individual as well as collective truths about the human condition.

**Themes and Stylistic Elements** Montale was a metaphysical poet whose art probes and questions both personal and collective historical experience as well as the eternal questions of the meaning of existence, the role of love, and the place of humankind. In Montale's first major verse collection, *Cuttlefish Bones*, the sea and shore of the Ligurian coast near Genoa serve as symbols of the poet's emotional and mental states. Here Montale not only conveys the ethical and metaphysical anguish that was palpable in the aftermath of World War I but also

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

While Montale's poetry expressed a bleak view of modern life, it was also characterized by a persistent hope and the recognition of human dignity. Here are some other works with a similar view:

*The Waste Land* (1922), a poem by T. S. Eliot. This modernist poem uses satire and prophecy to express both despair and hope.

*Swan Song* (1987), a novel by Robert McCammon. This science fiction novel depicts a nuclear apocalypse and the evolution of humanity that follows.

*Arlington Park* (2007), a novel by Rachel Cusk. This novel explores the difficulties of modern life by following a group of young mothers through the course of one day.

explores what he perceives as ungovernable forces that shape human experience. The poems register loneliness, exhaustion, and despair, and ultimately offer no solutions to the poet's anxiety. Later volumes incorporate some of these motifs and introduce new emphases as well.

There is a kind of dramatic progression that accompanies Montale's poetic development. In *Cuttlefish Bones*, personal considerations such as memory, identity, and the relation of the self with the outside world are paramount. In his later collections, *Occasions* and *The Storm, and Other Poems*, these same concerns are viewed in the more complex historical context of the threat to civilized values posed by the brutal forces of war and fascism.

A saving constant for the poet in this period and a compelling presence in much of his poetry is a symbolic female figure identified as "Clizia" or "Volpe." By her very nature, she is opposed to the forces of darkness. She is an idealized lover or the embodiment of goodness and strength. The poet addresses his deepest concerns for himself and humanity to these angelic beings and draws hope and inspiration from them.

### Works in Critical Context

Montale is widely regarded as one of the dominant voices of modernism, not only within the context of Italian letters but also internationally. When comparing Montale to other poets, critics usually mention T. S. Eliot and Dante Alighieri. His disinterest in realism and his use of external phenomena—landscape, historical events, and physical objects—as a means of revealing thoughts and states of mind has led commentators to observe the influence of the symbolist poets in his work. Montale's focus on psychological and emotional states renders his verse subjective and sometimes inscrutable, leading to occasional accusations of intentional obscurity.

The publication of *Cuttlefish Bones* established Montale as a poet worthy of serious critical attention, but it was after *The Storm, and Other Poems* that he received considerable public recognition. The attention given Montale by renowned and respected critics such as Gianfranco Contini, Alfredo Gargiulo, and, later, Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo and Glauco Cambon, among many others in Italy and elsewhere, has not abated. The first collection was not universally acclaimed, but for the most part, contemporary critics praised it as an event of lasting importance that presented an authentically new voice.

***Cuttlefish Bones*** When *Cuttlefish Bones* was published in 1925, it was widely regarded as a success. Literary scholar G. Singh declares, "It is...those poems specifically grouped under the title [*Cuttlefish Bones*] that reveal Montale's art at its best." Singh also asserts that Montale was an artist of consistent quality, even in this first collection: "The most conspicuous characteristic of [*Cuttlefish Bones*] is its strikingly uniform level of maturity—a maturity that does not depend on, and cannot therefore be explained in terms of, the stages of development one can often trace in the works and careers of other poets." Alfred Corn seems to agree, noting that the book "makes the impression it does not only because of its serious thematic concerns but also because of Montale's careful craftsmanship."

### Responses to Literature

1. Although he was accused of antifascist tendencies by the fascist government of Italy, Montale remained largely apolitical in his views and works. After reading several poems, hold a group discussion and determine if there are any underlying political messages in his works. What do his political messages suggest?
2. Montale rarely used real places, objects, or events in his poetry. Select one poem and note where his themes and images might benefit from the inclusion of external phenomena.
3. Montale's poetry focuses on psychological and emotional states while generally excluding external descriptions. Write a poem or set of poems that recreates a psychological or emotional state without making use of external description.
4. Montale often expressed a negative view of modern life that also included the hope that things could and would be better. Write an essay or poem expressing your view on the present-day world and outlining your hopes for the future.

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## Lucy Maud Montgomery

BORN: 1874, Clifton, Prince Edward Island, Canada

DIED: 1942, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Novels, short stories

MAJOR WORKS:

*Anne of Green Gables* (1908)

*Chronicles of Avonlea* (1912)

*Emily of New Moon* (1923)

*The Blue Castle* (1926)

*Emily's Quest* (1927)

### Overview

A popular and financially successful writer, Lucy Maud (or L. M.) Montgomery MacDonald is considered one of Canada's best-known and most enduring authors of children's fiction. Although she wrote many works for adults—romantic novels, short stories, poetry, an autobiography, and *Courageous Women* (1934), a collection of biographical sketches—her books for young readers are her most important achievement. They emphasize the imaginative, emotional, and nostalgic aspects of childhood and adoles-



L.M. Montgomery *Montgomery, L.M., photograph*. Public Archives of Canada.

cence while underscoring the importance of their Prince Edward Island settings. Characterized by both realism and sentimentality, they document the conflicts and successes of heroines who are motherless or orphaned.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***A Child's Respite in Books and Writing*** Lucy Maud Montgomery was born on November 30, 1874, in Clifton, Prince Edward Island. Her parents, Hugh Montgomery, a former sea captain turned merchant, and Clara Macneill Montgomery, came from large, long-established, and eminent Prince Edward Island families. Clara Montgomery died before her daughter, always known as Maud, was two years old. Montgomery's grief-stricken father sent her to live with her elderly, strict Presbyterian maternal grandparents at their isolated farmhouse in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island.

Montgomery was a solitary child, sensitive, imaginative, and rather out of place in her grandparents' household. She found respite in books, notably, works by Dickens, Scott, Byron, and Longfellow, and in writing stories and poems of her own, a talent that she developed at a very early age. She also enjoyed the company of her many cousins and later school friends.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Montgomery's famous contemporaries include:

**Alexander Graham Bell** (1847–1922): Esteemed Scottish scientist and inventor best known for his invention of the telephone.

**Charles Talbut Onions** (C. T. Onions) (1873–1975): English grammarian and lexicographer best known for his collaborative work on *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

**James W. Tate** (1875–1922): Pianist, composer, songwriter, accompanist, and producer of popular pantomimes and revues.

**Booker T. Washington** (1856–1915): American educator, author, and leader of the African American community. Washington, a former slave, led a teacher's college for blacks and eventually became a spokesman for African Americans.

In 1890 her father, now remarried and with a new family, asked Montgomery to join him in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and she spent the next year in the Canadian West. She found her stepmother uncongenial (she was expected to serve as an unpaid maid and nanny and was kept home from school for months) and her father too busy with a variety of enterprises—business, political, and social—to be much of a companion. However, she soon made several close friends. She was thrilled in November 1890 when her first published work, a poem, appeared in the Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island *Daily Patriot*. She was equally excited to return to Prince Edward Island in August 1891.

**Trading Teaching for Writing** In 1893 Montgomery went to Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown to prepare for a teaching career. She taught in rural schools for three years, finding the work rather taxing and less rewarding than she had hoped, but she was able to devote several hours a day to writing. By the mid-1890s she had achieved moderate success as a writer, having had many stories and poems published for money.

Montgomery's grandfather died in 1898, and for the next thirteen years, with the exception of a brief stint in 1901 as a reporter for a Halifax newspaper, she lived with and cared for her aging grandmother in Cavendish. Her life there was very constrained, but she found enjoyment in writing. During this time Montgomery produced poems and stories, which, by the early 1900s, provided considerable income. During this time she also began two of her most important long-term friendships, based almost entirely on correspondence, with Canadian teacher Ephraim Weber and Scottish journalist G. B. MacMillan. In

her long letters to these sympathetic friends she was able to express her hopes and fears as a writer.

**Success with Anne** In 1907 Montgomery's previously rejected first novel was accepted by a publisher. In 1908 *Anne of Green Gables*, the appealing story of an imaginative, irrepressible, red-headed orphan girl who was adopted by two elderly Prince Edward Islanders was published by the L. C. Page Company of Boston. The story was clearly inspired by Montgomery's own childhood in Prince Edward Island with her grandparents. It was an immediate and tremendous success with readers of all ages and both sexes. Montgomery wrote to a friend, "Anne seems to have hit the public taste." Among the thousands of fan letters Montgomery received was one from Mark Twain, who described her heroine as "the dearest and most lovable child in fiction since the immortal Alice." A sequel, *Anne of Avonlea*, followed in 1909 and, despite not having received very favorable royalty terms from her publisher, Montgomery's professional and financial success was assured. Eventually, eight *Anne* books would be published.

Montgomery's grandmother died in March of 1911. Four months later the author married Ewan MacDonald, a Presbyterian minister to whom she had been secretly engaged for five years. After a honeymoon in the British Isles, the MacDonalds returned to Canada, where Ewan resumed his pastoral duties in Leaskdale, Ontario. Montgomery found that being a minister's wife involved endless rounds of meetings, sewing bees, Sunday school classes, choir practice, and visits. To these responsibilities she soon added those of a mother, with sons Chester born in 1912 and Stuart in 1915. Despite her hectic schedule, she continued to write.

**Growing Appreciation of Her Work** World War I was a source of great concern to Montgomery, and her relief over the end of the war was soon overwhelmed by a series of travails. In January 1919 her cousin and closest friend, Frederica Campbell, died. Later in the same year her husband suffered an attack of what was termed "religious melancholia," a feeling of hopeless certainty of eternal damnation. After several months Ewan recovered, but he remained subject to attacks at irregular and unpredictable intervals for the rest of his life. Henceforth, Ewan became a source of chronic anxiety for Montgomery. In addition, in 1920 she became engaged in a series of acrimonious, expensive, and very trying lawsuits with publisher L. C. Page, which dragged on until Montgomery finally won in 1929.

Montgomery did find consolations in the 1920s, however. Her growing sons were always a source of delight and pride to her. In 1926 the family moved to Norval, Ontario, where Ewan became the minister of a smaller congregation. In the early 1920s Montgomery created a new, highly autobiographical heroine, *Emily of New Moon*, who proved nearly as popular as Anne. Her achievements were recognized in 1923 when she became the first Canadian woman to be named a fellow of the Royal Society of

Arts in England. She was further honored in August 1927 when she was asked to meet the visiting Prince of Wales (the future Edward VIII) and Stanley Baldwin, the British prime minister and *Anne of Green Gables* fan.

**Accolades and Anxieties** Montgomery's successes and anxieties continued through the 1930s. Several of her new juvenile books were well received. She was invested with the Order of the British Empire in 1935, and in 1936 the Canadian government created a national park on Prince Edward Island in and around Cavendish because of the renown Montgomery's books had brought the area. Ewan's health, however, was her primary concern. In 1935, after a series of physical ailments, he had a complete breakdown and was institutionalized for months. He slowly improved, but, overwhelmed by stress, Montgomery had a brief breakdown of her own. In 1935 Ewan retired, and the MacDonalds moved to Toronto, where their sons were at college. Ewan and Montgomery both had breakdowns again in 1937, but both recovered, and by the spring of 1939 Montgomery wrote that she was feeling better than she had in years.

Her recovery was of short duration, however. The outbreak of World War II depressed her greatly. Ewan's health declined, and, after a bad fall in 1940, Montgomery herself became very ill. Her condition worsened in 1941, and she died on April 24, 1942.

The author of more than twenty books and hundreds of short stories and poems, Montgomery never felt she had achieved what she had aimed for—her “great” book. She was appreciative of her financial and popular successes and felt that her work was well done as far as it went, but she recognized and regretted her limitations. Serious critics agreed with her, and for years she was dismissed as a hack writer of children's books. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, as part of their search for a unique Canadian identity, Canadian scholars devoted a great deal of attention to L. M. Montgomery and the continued popularity of her works.

### Works in Literary Context

Throughout her career Montgomery struggled with an inner conflict: whether to satisfy public taste by writing profitable light romances or fulfill her own desire and produce a serious literary work. She never realized that with *Anne of Green Gables* she had produced a classic.

**The Childhood of an Orphan** Having been raised by strict disciplinarian grandparents in an otherwise lonely atmosphere, Montgomery began to read a great deal. When she began writing, it was “with an exhaustive, unforgiving memory of what a thin-skinned, imaginative child can suffer and an unquenchable delight in children's pleasures,” wrote Frances Frazer in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Montgomery's own mother died before she was two years old, and her father left her to be cared for by her grandparents. This absence of typical parental figures is reflected in her two most famous fictional creations, Anne Shirley and Emily Starr. Both are

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

“Youth is not a vanished thing,” Montgomery once wrote, “but something that dwells forever in the heart.” Here are a few works by writers who reach back into their own childhoods for inspiration:

*Little House on the Prairie* (1935), a novel by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Part of a literary series known collectively as the Little House series, these stories feature a hard-working family who lives in the untamed West of the United States in the late nineteenth century.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), a novel by Harper Lee. Lee based her novel about racial tensions on an event that happened in her hometown in Alabama when she was ten years old.

*Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), a novel by Truman Capote. Capote, a childhood friend of *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee, wrote this, his first novel, based on his youthful experiences in Alabama.

*Claudine at School* (1900), a novel by Colette. This novel and other “Claudine” novels by Colette present a roughly autobiographical sketch of a sometimes shockingly forthright girl growing up in France.

girls who become orphaned at a young age, yet remain optimistic and good-natured despite their hardships.

### Works in Critical Context

Montgomery's critical reception has been mixed. Many critics label her works nonliterary, pointing to her use of excessive sentiment, flowery prose, and inconsistent characterization. Montgomery's plots and characters are sometimes regarded as derivative, and she is censured for not representing real growth except in *Emily and Anne*. Some critics hold that Anne's appeal diminishes as she gets older and more conservative. Others say that none of Montgomery's works equaled her first book. Most reviewers, however, commend her as a true storyteller whose charm and honesty transcend her faults. Montgomery “remembered exactly how it was to be a child,” explained Jean Little in *L. M. Montgomery: An Assessment*. “More than that,” Little continues, “she was able to record the experience of being a child so faithfully and vividly that reading children, years later, find themselves in her stories.” So it was, especially, with *Anne of Green Gables*.

**Anne of Green Gables (1908)** *Anne of Green Gables*, the appealing story of an imaginative, irrepressible, red-headed orphan girl who is adopted by two elderly Prince Edward Islanders, remains Montgomery's greatest popular success. It was performed as a play in 1937, made into two filmed versions in the United States

## *Henry de Montherlant*

in 1921 and 1934, adapted for a British television series in 1972 and two Canadian (CBC) TV films (*Anne* in 1985 and *Anne of Green Gables: The Sequel* in 1987).

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne finds the subject of good behavior troubling. What does it mean to the characters in the story to be “good”? Why do you think good behavior is so important? Do any of the characters stray from the rules? How? Does Anne change her attitude and behavior, and if so, how? Why?
2. Montgomery loved fashionable clothes and looking smart. Her attitude toward fashion can be seen in the novel. What role does fashion play in it? What do the characters’ attitudes about fashion reveal about themselves, and how do these attitudes affect their relationships with one another?

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## ✉ Henry de Montherlant

BORN: 1896, Paris, France

DIED: 1972, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Drama, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Bachelors* (1934)

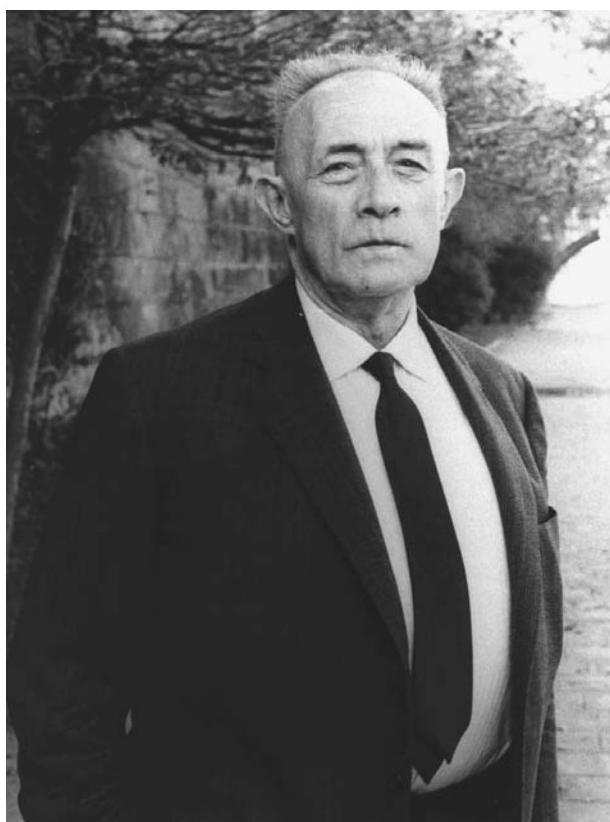
- The Costals Trilogy* (1936–1939)  
*Malatesta* (1949)  
*Port-Royal* (1954)  
*The Civil War* (1965)

### Overview

Henry de Montherlant was a nonconformist, and his plays, novels, and essays reflect his own experiences, particularly those he had as a soldier in World War I in addition to his personal, and controversial, relationships. Eager to provoke life as the heroes in his works do, Montherlant questioned the norms of society and valued experiences that produced intense emotions. Although created after the decadent period, his work is often classified as having decadent themes.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Secrets Kept in Early Life** Born in Paris, Montherlant was extremely close to his mother as a young boy, perhaps because she had almost died giving birth to him. His grandmother was also an important figure in his life, and he shared her home for years. On a trip with his grandmother, Montherlant discovered his fascination



Henry de Montherlant. *Montherlant, Henry de, photograph*. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

with bullfighting, a sport that lends color to much of his early work and inspired his second novel *Les Bestiaires* (1926). He also developed a keen interest in early Greek and Roman culture, which would be intrinsic to his writings in years to come.

Just as Montherlant was preparing for his baccalaureate exam at a private Catholic high school, he was dismissed for homosexual conduct. He could not forget the shame he endured from the public scandal, but he eventually passed his baccalaureate exam and, in 1912, began studying law. From then on, he kept his personal life hidden from view and adopted the pose of a compulsive womanizer in his works.

**Military Experience and Adventures Abroad** At the outbreak of World War I, Montherlant intended to enlist in the army, but his ailing mother begged him to delay his entrance. When she died in 1915, he applied to the army again, but his poor health kept him from being accepted until 1917. His frontline military experience influenced his first novel, *Le Songe* (1922).

The year 1925 proved a turning point in Montherlant's life. Because of his grandmother's death, nothing kept him at the family home at Neuilly. He moved to an apartment in Paris, and for the next thirteen years he treated it only as storage space: He did not even unpack his trunks. He traveled widely instead, in search of exotic experiences. Montherlant went to Spain (where he fought bulls and was more than once gored by them), and from Spain he traveled to North Africa.

During the late 1920s and the 1930s, Montherlant established a solid notoriety as a particularly caustic and even iconoclastic novelist, publishing such acclaimed works as *The Bachelors* (1934). *The Costals Trilogy*, published from 1936 to 1939, made him famous, but even before publishing these works, he had already produced a substantial body of fiction, all of it stylish, sophisticated, and more or less shocking to conventional readers.

Montherlant tried his hand at drama as well during this period, penning *Pasiphae* (1936). The play examines the psychological life of the mother of the mythological beast called the minotaur.

**A Nazi Collaborator?** When World War II erupted in Europe in 1939, Montherlant became an unofficial war correspondent for the magazine *Marianne*, and was once wounded by the flying remnants from the explosion of a nearby bomb. He also took part in civic duties. He was jailed for a time after publishing seemingly pro-Nazi material, but he was later released. Nevertheless, after World War II, although not charged for collaboration with the Germans or the Vichy government (the German-controlled government of occupied France), Montherlant appeared in various newspapers on lists of traitors that included such writers as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Robert Brasillach, Marcel Jouhandeu, and Jean Giono.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Montherlant's famous contemporaries include:

**Louis-Ferdinand Céline** (1894–1961): Céline was a French author who influenced the development of twentieth-century writing through his pioneering style and controversial works.

**André Breton** (1896–1966): Breton was a French writer who was one of the main founders of the surrealist movement.

**John Dos Passos** (1896–1970): Dos Passos was an American novelist whose nonlinear and stream-of-consciousness style had a major influence on twentieth-century fiction.

**Jean Piaget** (1896–1980): Piaget was a Swiss psychologist best known for his studies on children that led to his theory of cognitive development.

**Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–1986): De Beauvoir was a French novelist and philosopher best known for her pioneering work in feminism, *The Second Sex* (1949).

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960): Camus was a French author, philosopher, and journalist associated with the existentialist movement. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957.

**Writing Plays** Montherlant's early career was dominated by writing fiction, but as he grew older he began concentrating on writing plays. In *La Reine morte* (*The Dead Queen*; 1942), one of Montherlant's most popular plays, a king's political ambitions are upset by his son's secret marriage, and the king goes into a state of self-examination. *La Ville dont le Prince est un enfant* (1951) explores the intimate relationship of two boys at a Catholic school, a plot seemingly drawn from the scandal of Montherlant's own school days.

**Later Life** Montherlant continued to write to the end of his life. In the last phase of his life—during the late 1960s and the early 1970s—he returned to his first love, the novel, while still enjoying success in the theater with plays already written. Montherlant became obsessed with suicide, often writing about it in his notebooks. In 1972, after battling ill health for years, he took his own life.

## Works in Literary Context

**Misogyny** Many critics have labeled Montherlant's work, particularly *The Costals Trilogy* anti-female. In the novels that make up the collection, the central character, Pierre Costals, a successful writer modeled after Montherlant, finds the relationships between traditional couples horrifying because they lead to boredom, inevitably limit personal freedom, and end in a slow and

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Montherlant had a lifelong fascination with bulls and bullfighting. Here are some other works centered around bulls:

*Blood and Sand* (1922), a film directed by Fred Niblo. This silent movie starred the famous Rudolph Valentino as a poor village boy who grows up to become a famous matador.

*The Sun Also Rises* (1926), a novel by Ernest Hemingway. This novel about the spiritually and morally exhausted "lost generation" of the 1920s follows a band of hard-drinking sophisticates on a trip to Pamplona, Spain for the Feast of San Fermin and the famous running of the bulls. Hemingway's own fascination with bull fighting is clearly evident in the novel.

*The Minotaur Takes a Cigarette Break* (2003), a novel by Steven Sherrill. In this novel, the mythological half-man half-bull minotaur survives the millennia since his birth and winds up living in a trailer park in the Deep South and working as a cook in a barbecue restaurant.

torturous death. Critics have noted that in these novels, women are, to both Costals and Montherlant, manipulative, silly, and insincere beings, physically and intellectually inferior to men. However, Costals, unlike Montherlant, does not reject relationships with women and even accepts the idea of marriage with a woman who could give him children and act as a secretary, thus facilitating his work.

In her highly influential feminist work, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir writes that for Montherlant, "The ideal woman is perfectly stupid and obedient; she is always ready to serve a man without ever asking for anything in return." Although Montherlant's novels may appear relentlessly antifeminist to contemporary readers, his ideas aligned with the more-or-less-accepted attitude toward women in the early 1900s. In fact, de Beauvoir suggests that Montherlant actually provoked women to speak up for themselves and thus initiated a feminist movement. She writes, "We should congratulate Montherlant for demystifying the eternal woman, because it is by rejecting the idea of womanhood that women can finally assert themselves as human beings."

**Decadence** Although Montherlant's work was published in the twentieth century, he seems heavily influenced by the decadence movement in French literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. Such writers as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Paul Verlaine rejected conventional morality and reveled in excesses of the senses writing poetry laced with high emotion and

personal symbolism. Montherlant's seems to have taken up the rallying cry of these poets: "*épater le bourgeoisie*"—"shock the middle class."

### Works in Critical Context

Montherlant was admired and praised by many notable writers and disliked by as many others. Much of the controversy surrounding Montherlant's writings concerned his topics, even though he wrote in the style of men like Ernest Hemingway, praising war and bullfighting, and characterizing women as weak and a bother to men.

**Disagreement Among Critics** In 1961 Justin O'Brien wrote of Montherlant: "Many articulate Frenchmen had seen him as the greatest living writer of France." O'Brien cited André Gide and Albert Camus as being among Montherlant's prominent admirers. O'Brien later praised Montherlant: "However much he feels himself to be out of harmony with our time, Henry de Montherlant will live as one of the outstanding writers of the century."

Some critics disagree with this analysis. Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "Montherlant wishes woman to be contemptible." She continued that for Montherlant "love and friendship are trifles, scorn prevents action. He does not believe in art for art's sake, and he does not believe in God. There remains only the immanence of pleasure."

### Responses to Literature

1. Critics have noted that the themes of war, sex, and individuality permeate Montherlant's works. Read one of Montherlant's novels. With a classmate, brainstorm a list of other themes that can be identified. Then, note some specific examples from the text that illustrate these themes.
2. Montherlant has been accused of both hating and fearing women. Read one of Montherlant's novels (perhaps the one you read for the previous assignment). Write an essay in which you analyze a female character and discuss whether or not you see Montherlant's hate and/or fear reflected in her development. Use examples from the text to prove your point.
3. Montherlant's alleged misogyny has driven some feminist critics to dismiss his works, while it has led others to indicate that he, as Simone de Beauvoir stated, "provoked women to speak up for themselves." Imagine that Montherlant is still alive and write a letter or e-mail to him stating your views on his treatment of women and explaining your reactions to the portrayal of women in one of the works you have read.

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 Paul Muldoon

BORN: 1951, Armagh, Northern Ireland

NATIONALITY: British, Northern Irish

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

- New Weather* (1973)
- Why Brownlee Left* (1980)
- Madoc: A Mystery* (1990)
- Hay* (1998)
- Horse Latitudes* (2006)

### Overview

Pulitzer Prize-winning Paul Muldoon is recognized as one of Ireland's major contemporary poets, though his work is often considered difficult and obscure. His poetry is characterized by archaic language, subtle wit, odd rhyme scheme, inventive concits, and multilayered structures of meaning.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood and “the Troubles”** Paul Muldoon was born in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, and raised near the village of Moy, where his mother was a schoolteacher and his father a laborer and market gardener. He grew up during a time known as “The Troubles,” during which conflicts



Paul Muldoon *Muldoon, Paul, photograph.* © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

between Northern Irish citizens seeking independence from England (the nationalists) and those wishing to remain a part of the British Empire (the unionists) were common and often deadly. Muldoon's home county of Armagh was in fact one of the deadliest regions during The Troubles, with nearly three hundred killed between 1969 and 2001 as a result of nationalist and unionist conflicts.

Muldoon attended St. Patrick's College in Armagh, and, inspired by several of his teachers, developed a strong interest in Irish Gaelic language, literature, and song, as well as in English literature. One of Muldoon's teachers introduced him to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and Muldoon quickly became an Eliot enthusiast, writing poetry that was often imitative of Eliot's. He sent several of his poems to Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, Irish poets who were gaining recognition in the 1960s, and a few of Muldoon's works were published by Heaney in the periodical *Thresholds*.

As an undergraduate at Queen's University in Belfast, Muldoon studied under Heaney and joined him at weekly poetry gatherings held at Heaney's home. The group, which included the Ulster poets Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, the critic Michael Allen, as well as several other young poets, served as a critical forum.

Muldoon moved to the United States in 1987, where he currently teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Muldoon's famous contemporaries include:

- Seamus Heaney** (1939–): An influential contemporary Irish poet, Heaney won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995.
- Neil Jordan** (1950–): Irish filmmaker and novelist who won an Academy Award for his 1992 film *The Crying Game*.
- Bob Geldof** (1951–): An Irish musician and political activist, Geldof helped found the charitable group known as Band Aid.
- Tommy Hilfiger** (1951–): An American fashion designer world famous for his "Tommy" and "Tommy Hilfiger" clothing lines.
- Joey Ramone** (1951–2001): An American musician who led the groundbreaking punk band the Ramones.
- Paul Reubens** (1952–): An American writer and comedian best known for his portrayal of the character Pee-wee Herman.
- Michael Cunningham** (1952–): An American author, Cunningham won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1998 with his novel *The Hours*.

### Works in Literary Context

Muldoon's poetry seems to go in two directions at once: back to the Irish mythological roots and forward to metaphysical worlds of his own devising. These two worlds come together in his poetry and, as they are intertwined, seem not divergent at all. Muldoon's voice has remained highly individual and his verse is not associated with any particular poetical movement.

**Self-Discovery** Early in his career, Muldoon won praise for the wit and promise of his work, but many critics cast him as a lesser Seamus Heaney. Muldoon's third collection, *Why Brownlee Left*, marks a more mature stage in his poetic development that set him apart as a poet with a unique voice. For the first time in Muldoon's work, a single theme, that of self-discovery, connects the poems of the collection, which are more experimental in form and more extravagant in their wit and irony than his earlier work. The final and longest poem of the collection, "Imram," is Muldoon's contemporary interpretation of the ninth-century Irish voyage tale "Imram Mael Duin." In Muldoon's version the Celtic "Otherworld" of the original poem is represented by a surreal modern demimonde of decadence, drugs, and vice, which critics have commented gives the work the seamy atmosphere of a Raymond Chandler detective novel.

**Poetry as Narrative** *Why Brownlee Left* stands as a model for Muldoon's subsequent major collections of

poetry: *Quoof, Meeting the British*, and *Madoc: A Mystery*. With each new work, Muldoon's poetry has become more abstruse. In the title poem of *Madoc: A Mystery*, for example, the narrative is partitioned into short poems, each captioned with the name of a philosopher, from the ancient Greeks to Stephen Hawking, about whom the lines of the poem are believed by critics to make particular commentary.

The collections following *Why Brownlee Left* also exhibit a similar format in which a group of shorter poems precedes a long narrative poem. In both his long and short poems, Muldoon's poetic style remains densely allusive and witty.

### Works in Critical Context

**Beyond the Shadow of Seamus Heaney** Muldoon was once thought to work in the shadow of Seamus Heaney, but his reputation has grown with repeated honors, which include the T. S. Eliot Prize in 1994, the *Irish Times* Poetry Prize in 1997, and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2003. Although Muldoon has obviously earned high honors with his distinctly individual style, critics and peers still compare him to famous writers. In 2001, Ben Dowling of the *Wall Street Journal* linked Muldoon to James Joyce and others, suggesting that Muldoon "shows just how dangerous it is to swallow Joyce whole, how soon one ends up coining words such as 'oscaraboscabarabiny,' jabbering about 'tegelmoustied Tuaregs' and generally sounding like an unholy amalgam of Ezra Pound and Dr. Seuss." Yet Robert Macfarlane of the *Times Literary Supplement* in 2002 uses a Shakespeare reference to caution against classifying Muldoon's style: "Those who think of Paul Muldoon as the benign, pudgy Puck of contemporary poetry, imping around with a mischievous grin on his type-face, miss the vital dimension of ethical seriousness in which his work exists."

**Poetic Originality and Idiosyncrasy** Although Muldoon has been criticized for what many consider the bafflingly allusive nature of his works, he is highly acclaimed for the extraordinary originality and artistic skill he exhibits in his poems. In 2003, Laura Quinney of the *London Review of Books* wrote: "Everyone who reads Paul Muldoon will be dazzled by his linguistic exuberance[.] In his best poems, the technical flair and buoyant voice go manic, outlining the shape of other emotions, and hollowing out a place for another consciousness, which does not share in the pride and prerogative of the style. He rides the wave of his swank virtuosity, but chaos and sorrow underlie it." In the same vein, Richard Eder in a 2001 issue of the *New York Times Book Review* stated: "Muldoon's manner is both playful and troubled. Though he subverts connection, meaning and the reverence of art and life, he subverts subversion as well. If reality has become an irrelevant philosophical and artistic concept, we sense beneath the clowning a refusal of its passing."

**New Weather and Why Brownlee Left** Though some readers found *New Weather* consistent with, yet not the most impressive of, Muldoon's work, the collection illuminates the complexities of ordinary things or events. A number of critics have noted that the collection explores psychological development with apparent simplicity and eloquence while offering keen insights into the subjective nature of perception. An anonymous reviewer from *The Complete Review* also suggests the volume is grounded in "biographical tidbits, scenes from [Muldoon's] life and from Ireland, the preoccupation with America, religion." *Why Brownlee Left* is deemed a more mature effort than Muldoon's earlier collections. This collection is often considered more approachable; indeed, critic Andrew Motion compares Muldoon to a "miniatuerised Robert Frost," with his earthy settings and dialogue.

### Responses to Literature

1. Muldoon has often been accused of being intentionally obscure and extremely difficult to understand. With a group of your classmates, discuss ways in which his poems might present undue difficulties for readers. Then, discuss ways in which readers might get something out of his poems even if they cannot fully understand his meanings. Use examples from some of Muldoon's poetry to support your opinions.
2. Muldoon has been praised for the originality of his poetry. Using resources at your library or on the Internet, research the work of Robert Frost, James Joyce, or Dr. Seuss. Create an oral presentation comparing one or two poems written by Muldoon to one or two poems written by the poet you researched. Note places that represent Muldoon's originality, as well as places that reflect the influence and style of the other poet.
3. Muldoon's collection *Madoc: A Mystery* mixes poetry with the mystery genre to create a unique effect. Write a poem or set of poems that draws on another, different literary genre.
4. Muldoon has written lyrics for rock bands, but his poetry has yet to be set to music. Choose one or more of his poems that would work if set to contemporary rock music and write a paragraph explaining why you think so.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Muldoon is noted for the use of puns and other types of witty and obscure wordplay. Here are some other works that use similar techniques:

- "Five Satyres (c. 1590), poems by John Donne. Many of Donne's poems make use of puns and satirical verses to achieve notable effects and images.
- "Jabberwocky" (1871), a poem by Lewis Carroll. This poem is almost entirely made up of nonsense words with the intention of demonstrating an extreme type of poetic construction.
- Finnegans Wake* (1939), a novel by James Joyce. This novel was written with extremely innovative language that combined multilingual puns with a stream-of-consciousness prose style.

Kendall, Tim and Peter McDonald, eds. *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*. Liverpool, U.K.: Liverpool University Press, 2004.

Longley, Edna. "Stars and Horses, Pigs and Trees." *The Crane Bag* Dublin: Arts Council of Ireland, 1979.

## Alice Munro

BORN: 1931, Wingham, Ontario, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Short stories, novels

MAJOR WORKS:

*Lives of Girls and Women* (1971)

*Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You: Thirteen Stories* (1974)

*Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978)

*The Moons of Jupiter* (1982)

*Runaway* (2004)

### Overview

The Canadian master of the short story, Alice Munro specializes in making the ordinary scenes of life extraordinary through straightforward storytelling that focuses on relationships, unpredictable characters, and mysterious endings. Many of her stories are set in southwestern Ontario, Canada.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Years in Ontario** Born Alice Ann Laidlaw in Wingham, Ontario, Canada, on July 10, 1931, Munro is



Alice Munro Munro, Alice, photograph. AP Images.

the daughter of a schoolteacher and a farmer. Perhaps she inherited her literary ambitions from her father, Robert Laidlaw, who would write a novel about pioneers in his later years. However, her family, especially mother Ann Chamney, discouraged her ambitions to become a writer and tried to focus instead on raising a future farmer's wife. As a result, young Munro hid her efforts at short stories.

At age sixteen, she sold her first story to CBC Radio in Canada. She won a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario, which she entered in 1949. In 1951, she left the university to marry James Munro, with whom she moved to Vancouver, British Columbia. Nostalgic for her home, she began to focus her stories on the Wingham area of Ontario. Indeed, rural Ontario would feature prominently in her work through her career. However, her career took a back seat for a while when she gave birth to three daughters in four years. Her second child died soon after birth. Munro would have another daughter in 1966, completing the family. The experience of marriage and motherhood provided inspiration for many of Munro's stories, which deal poignantly with intimate family relationships.

Another frequent backdrop for Munro's stories is the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and Canada, particularly the women's rights movement. Many of her female characters undergo transformations that echo social transformations of this time. They question established female roles and try—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—to live lives that they find truly satisfying.

**Inspired by Southern Fiction, Launches Successful Writing Career** The Munro family moved to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1963 and opened a bookstore called Munro's. Inspired by the books that surrounded her, Munro rededicated herself to fiction and began to

publish stories in Canadian magazines and sell them for broadcast on the CBC.

Munro found inspiration in the stories of American Southern writers like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty. She saw parallels between her life in rural Ontario and the life they described in the closed society of the South. Though she wrote about what was familiar to her, she has remarked that during this time she felt as if she were leading a double life—a solitary life as a writer, and an external life as wife and mother.

After a series of rejections, Munro's first book of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, was published in 1968. It emerged to great critical success, winning the Governor General's Award for fiction in 1969 and gathering a wide audience for Munro. The stories laid a groundwork for her future writing, which would deal with unique moments in real life, adding a bit of magic to the everyday.

Determined to gain further success as a writer, Munro began work on *Lives of Girls and Women*, a collection of connected stories she intended to be a novel. Munro had been thinking about this book for nearly a decade, and she worked on it at least three hours a day in the years after her first book's appearance. The book won the 1971–1972 Canadian Booksellers Award, was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club, and went through a number of printings in Canada and abroad.

By this time, Munro's marriage had gone sour, and she moved to London, Ontario, in 1972 with her younger daughters. Her alma mater, the University of Western Ontario, invited her to take a writer-in-residence position in 1974 and 1975, which she accepted. She married Gerald Fremlin in 1976, and they moved to Clinton, Ontario, where she has lived ever since.

**Mature Work About Complicated Issues Facing Women** Some critics had wondered if Munro would ever deal with anything beyond the teenage experience in a small town. Munro's 1974 collection, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, answered this concern with a series of stories dealing not only with country life, but also with urban living, adult relationships, and conflict between generations and the sexes. The stories in the collection often rely on contrasts between old and young, city and country, past and present, to develop their characters and tell their stories.

In 1978, Munro published another collection, *Who Do You Think I Am?* This book dealt with a young woman's return to her hometown after reinventing herself in years past—a theme clearly tied to Munro's own life experience. Its issues of identity and guilt met with positive critical response. The book won the Governor General's Award in 1979 and was a runner-up for the Booker Prize in England. In addition to her blooming career in short stories, Munro also found success in

scriptwriting around this time, with her CBC film on the Irish airing in 1978.

Although it was widely believed that short stories could never make any money, the publication of *The Moons of Jupiter* in 1982 proved critics wrong. The book's paperback rights sold for a record amount, and the book debuted to great reviews. Dealing with women at various stages in life, *The Moons of Jupiter* showed women coping with the random hand dealt to them by fate.

Munro continued to publish books about every four years throughout the 1980s and 1990s. *The Progress of Love* brought Munro yet another Governor General's Prize, and both *The Love of a Good Woman* and *Runaway* (2004) won the Giller Prize for fiction. Munro continues to publish short stories in magazines like *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, has toured the United States, Asia, and Europe promoting her books, and shows no sign of slowing her now-legendary literary career.

### Works in Literary Context

Although she claims to have been strongly influenced by writers of the American South such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers, Alice Munro is most widely compared to the Russian writer Anton Chekhov, who was known for his short stories and attention to detail.

**Small-Town Life** Most of Munro's stories are set in small towns and use small-town life as a way of shining light on such human experiences as love, loss, and generational conflict. The focused setting of a small town allows Munro to explore the deeper meanings of seemingly normal experiences like preparing a turkey for a meal or meeting an old friend.

**Random Encounters** Munro often deals with themes of random experience and seemingly haphazard fate. The incidents that initiate conflict in her stories are often random or accidental: for example, in "Accident" a child's death in a random car accident sparks the beginning of one marriage and the end of another. Other stories feature random encounters such as old acquaintances running into one another. Though the initiating event is often random, the series of events that follow always points to a bigger picture.

**Generation Gap** Munro's mother suffered from Parkinson's disease, and her stories often involve children taking care of their parents. In addition, her stories frequently deal with conflict or lack of connection between generations. Outrageous parents clash with timid children, a daughter comes to realize that she has given up life's opportunities to avoid being like her mother, and children must navigate a new world without their parents.

**Magic Realism** Although Munro's work does not fall within the literary movement of Magical Realism, her use

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Munro's famous contemporaries include:

**Maya Angelou** (1928–): American poet and Civil Rights figure famous for her autobiographies and activism.

**Fay Weldon** (1931–): British novelist and scriptwriter whose often comic work focuses on the trouble of women in contemporary society and the oppressiveness of marriage.

**Philip Glass** (1937–): American composer known for his minimalist musical style.

**Andy Warhol** (1928–1987): American artist and Pop Art icon.

of exact details to create a better-than-the-real-thing world is reminiscent of such visual artists as Edward Hopper and Jack Chambers, who adopted a magical realist style in their paintings. Munro likes to take everyday situations and twist them just enough to make them seem magical and exciting. Her recognition of mysterious and enchanted moments in life makes all of life seem less ordinary.

### Works in Critical Context

Alice Munro's short stories and books have been hailed by modern critics, gathering an impressive list of awards and becoming best sellers worldwide. While her initial work met with rejection and difficulty finding a publisher, her perseverance paid off and her later work met with almost unanimous praise.

Though critics liked Munro's early books, they disliked her tendency to write about adolescents in small towns. Munro answered their challenge in her later work, which deals with child and adult experiences and even added urban settings to the mix. Critics are especially appreciative of Munro's attention to detail and her willingness to leave the reader hanging with her ambiguous endings and uncertain stories.

Some critics are unwilling to admit that the short story still has a place in English-language literature, but many critics hail Munro's work as a new renaissance for the form. Joyce Carol Oates, herself a master writer, has stated that "Munro writes stories that have the density—moral, emotional, sometimes historical—of other writers." Another reviewer stated that "from rather unpromising-sounding subject matter, [Munro] fashions short stories of extraordinary delicacy and resonance."

While relatively few books have been written about Munro to date, a number of periodicals and Web publications have devoted pages to her life and works. Robert Thacker gives a good overview of critical response to

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Alice Munro's short stories often deal with conflicts between people of different generations. Here are a few other works that focus on contrasts between different age groups:

*Fathers and Sons* (1862), by Ivan Turgenev. One of the first Russian novels to find widespread popularity, *Fathers and Sons* highlights what Turgenev saw as the growing generational divide in Russia in the mid-nineteenth century.

*Cheaper by the Dozen* (1946), by Frank Gilbreth Jr. and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey, tells the story of a family of twelve children whose wild ways clash with their parents' interests in efficiency.

*The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), by J.D. Salinger. In this novel, teenager Holden Caulfield feels alienated against the adult world around him during a visit to New York City.

*The Joy Luck Club* (1993), by Amy Tan. Tan's best-selling novel is a series of vignettes told by Chinese mothers, all immigrants to America, and their Chinese-American daughters.

Munro's work in his essay "Go Ask Alice: The Progress of Munro Criticism," which appeared in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* in 1991. Munro's continuing career will doubtless bring "the mother figure of Canadian fiction" to an even wider and more receptive audience.

**The Moons of Jupiter** With this book, Munro put the lie to the notion that readers do not buy or read collections of short stories. The Canadian paperback rights were sold to Penguin of Canada for \$45,000, a record amount for a Canadian short-story volume. The reviews were almost uniformly laudatory, with William French of the *Toronto Globe and Mail* asserting that Munro's "ability to convey nuances and imply the ambiguities inherent in human relationships has never been greater" and Benjamin De Mot in the *New York Times Book Review*, calling the book "witty, subtle, passionate... exceptionally knowledgeable about the content and movement—the entanglements and entailments—of individual human feeling."

**Runaway** Munro's *Runaway* also impressed critics, who praised it in the highest terms. *Kirkus Review* declared: "In a word: magnificent." *The Boston Globe*'s David Thoreen wrote: "Munro's stories are often praised for their scope and depth, and rightly so. Each of the stories in *Runaway* contains enough lived life to fill a typical novel, and reading them is to become immersed in the concerns and worlds of their various characters." In fact, some reviewers found the book so perfect they were

at a loss for words of praise sufficient for it. Jonathan Franzen of the *New York Times Book Review* wrote: "Basically, *Runaway* is so good that I don't want to talk about it here. Quotation can't do the book justice, and neither can synopsis. The way to do it justice is to read it."

### Responses to Literature

1. Alice Munro was discouraged in her ambitions to become a writer, and her family tried to steer her toward a more traditional role as a farmer's wife. How do you think this upbringing influenced the subject matter and themes of her stories?
2. Alice Munro has compared her own work to the short stories of such Southern writers as Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. Read a short story by one of these authors and compare and contrast it to one of Munro's stories. How do their portrayals of small-town life differ? How are they similar?
3. Munro's attention to detail is legendary. To find out more about how Munro's use of detail informs her writing, take a two-paragraph section of the Munro story of your choice and remove all description and detail. How does it differ from the original passage? Does removing detail improve or take away from the story? What does this exercise teach you about Munro's use of detail?
4. Munro is often compared to Anton Chekhov, an influential Russian writer of the nineteenth century. Using the Internet and the library, write a paper on the life and work of Chekhov. How might Chekhov compare to Munro? How does his work differ from Munro's?

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## ■ H. H. Munro

SEE *Saki*

## ■ Haruki Murakami

BORN: 1949, Kyoto, Japan

NATIONALITY: Japanese

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982)

*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985)

*Norwegian Wood* (1989)

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994–1995)

*Kafka on the Shore* (2002)

### Overview

Haruki Murakami is an important figure in contemporary Japanese letters mostly due to his extensive translations of



Haruki Murakami Murakami, Haruki, photograph. AP Images.

classic American fiction. At the same time, he has initiated a revolution in the style of Japanese fiction by nurturing new, urban, cosmopolitan, and distinctly American-flavored tastes in Japanese writing.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Childhood with Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky** Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto, Japan, on January 12, 1949, the only child of schoolteachers Chiaki and Miyuki Murakami. He grew up in the immediate aftermath of World War II, in which an aggressive Japan had battled the United States furiously in the Pacific. The war was only brought to a conclusion by two atomic bomb attacks launched by the United States against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945. The attacks wiped out both cities and led to Japan's unconditional surrender. Allied forces occupied Japan after the war until 1952.

Murakami spent his early years listening to his parents discuss eighth-century poetry and medieval war tales at the dinner table. Yet, the boy was not interested

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Murakami's famous contemporaries include:

- Vladimir Bukovsky** (1942–): Russian author and activist, he is most noted for being a former Soviet political dissident.
- Ken Follett** (1949–): British author of historical and thriller fiction, he has sold over 100 million copies of his books.
- Alexander Godunov** (1949–1995): When Godunov, a Russian ballet dancer, defected to the United States, he caused an international stir.
- Robert Haas** (1941–): This American poet has served two terms as U.S. poet laureate (from 1995 to 1997) and has contributed greatly to contemporary literature.
- Paloma Picasso** (1949–): Despite her fame as the French-Spanish daughter to Pablo Picasso and Françoise Gilot, she has earned her own way as a successful designer.

in the cradle of imperial culture, and in his early teenage years, he turned instead to the works of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky as well as to American writers like Raymond Chandler, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Kurt Vonnegut. In Kobe's many used-book stores, he found works written in their original languages available at less than half the price of their Japanese translations.

**Writing, Motion Pictures, and Jazz** Although Murakami actively contributed to his school newspaper and considered becoming a scenario writer while he was studying film at Waseda University in 1968, his development into a novelist did not immediately emerge. The student riots of 1969 protesting the Vietnam War disrupted his college years, and after he completed a thesis on the idea of the journey in American film and graduated in 1975, he became the owner of a successful jazz bar in a Tokyo suburb. He was making good money from the bar when, in 1981, after the success of his first two novels, he regretfully left it to begin full-time writing.

**Boku and the Rat** Murakami's first novel, *Hear the Wind Sing* (1979), won Gunzō magazine's twenty-second newcomer's prize in June 1979 and inspired a series of works featuring his signature characters, a worldly Boku and an anguished, inward-burrowing writer called the Rat. Though this tale was framed by the years during and after the Tokyo student uprisings from 1969 to 1973, his *Pinball, 1973* (1980) introduced readers to a twenty-four-year-old Boku and twenty-five-year-old the Rat in a type of modern fairy tale. The two main figures never meet in *Pinball* but reappear and eventually reunite in Murakami's

next novel, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), for which Murakami was awarded the Noma Literary Newcomer's Prize.

Murakami wrote his next novel, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, in five months between August 1984 and January 1985, after which he spent two more months revising it. *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) won the Tanizaki Literary Prize the year it was published.

### **Translation, Icon Status, and Successful Dance**

In the three years between the publication of these two novels, Murakami translated works by Raymond Carver and John Irving—two of many writers whom he met when he visited the United States briefly in 1984. From translating their works Murakami has said simply, "I learned a lot." He also learned from experimenting in short-fiction formats, publishing three collections in that genre.

Murakami returned to writing long fiction with *Norwegian Wood* (1987). The novel was wildly successful, selling about 2 million copies within its first year of publication. A sequel to *A Wild Sheep Chase* inspired by a Western pop song, *Dance, Dance, Dance* (1988), sold over a half million hardcover copies in Japan during the first six months after publication and received favorable reviews. *South of the Border*, which some critics considered a "companion" novel to *Norwegian Wood*, was also a success with the public and critics alike.

**Wind-Up Bird and War** In the interim between *Dance, Dance, Dance* and *South of the Border*, Murakami produced a novel that strayed from his usual concerns. *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994) focuses on what Murakami has said is the most important thing: "facing our history...and that means the history of war." Specifically, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, a three-volume work, presents World War II not as a firsthand experience, but as part of the psychological baggage that affects all Japanese of Murakami's generation. In 1995, Murakami was presented the Yomiuri Literary Prize by one of his most demanding critics, Kenzaburo Oe.

**Kafka Prize and Fantasy Award** As his works were translated abroad, Murakami acquired greater fame and collected several more literary awards, including the 1999 Kuwabara Takeo Academic Award for *Underground* (1997–1998); the 2006 Franz Kafka Prize; and the 2006 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel for *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). The author whose work has been adapted for film by such esteemed artists as Japanese director Jun Ichikawa, served as a visiting fellow at Princeton University and a Distinguished Writer in Residence at Tufts University. Today, he lives in Japan where he continues to write what he believes is, and should be, truly "global literature."

### **Works in Literary Context**

**Western Influences** Murakami grew up during the American occupation of his Japan, and he admired the

United States for its wealth and its cultural energy. The music of the United States also attracted him. For example, after hearing drummer Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers at a live concert in 1964, Murakami often skipped lunch to save money for records. His encyclopedic knowledge of jazz and of much popular culture of the United States is immediately apparent even to casual readers.

Murakami has been called the first writer completely at home with the features of American popular culture that permeate contemporary Japan. At the end of *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* (1985), for instance, the protagonist begins to lose consciousness while listening to Bob Dylan on a car stereo.

**Crisp, Clear Style for Ambitious Themes** Murakami has created an original, immediately recognizable style marked by humor, lightness, simplicity, and clarity, with bold, imaginative leaps and startling juxtapositions of images. In both his conspiracy novels and love-story novels, the author offers profound themes in his ambitious attempt to explore human relationships and political and historical issues that earlier works only faintly address.

**Conspiracy, American-Style** His conspiracy novels are designed to make readers uneasy in one sense, but in another sense use narrators who seem bemused by, rather than genuinely threatened by, hollow consumerism or dislocated modern life. In this way, his conspiracy novels become captivating rather than suffocating. By way of curious characters and labyrinthine undercurrents, his novels suggest that Japan's uniqueness has been preserved despite intrusive Americanization. These themes play well with American readers, who perhaps see in them two welcome consolations: that a McDonald's on every foreign corner does not necessarily mean global displacement; and that it is possible for a country such as Japan to remake itself from an imperialist aggressor to an economically successful pacifist.

### Works in Critical Context

For the critics who were used to sincere confessions of narrators easily identified with their authors, Murakami's playful, apolitical adventures into the undefinable—complete with an American soundtrack in some instances—proved most unacceptable. Young readers, however, loved his work from the start. "The Murakami phenomenon" was established early in the author's career and reached a crescendo in 1988, when girls were choosing their wardrobes to match the color of whichever volume of *Norwegian Wood* (1987)—the red or the green—they happened to be carrying that day.

**Norwegian Wood (1987)** *Norwegian Wood* is an adolescent adventure and an exploration of the thoughts and feelings of an emotionally detached thirty-seven-year-old Watanabe, who hears a Muzak version of the Beatles song this book is named for and is transported back to his college days. The two-volume work has sold more than 2 million hardback copies and has been Murakami's most

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* focused on the psychological impact of World War II. Here are a few other works that focus on aftermath of the war:

*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), a film directed by William Wyler. Winner of seven Academy Awards, this film follows the lives of three American soldiers who face various difficulties as they return to civilian life after World War II.

*The Tin Drum* (1959), a novel by Günter Grass. In this novel, protagonist Oskar Matzerath, an inmate in an German insane asylum in the 1950s, recalls his experiences during World War II.

*The Great Fire* (2003), a novel by Shirley Hazzard. This award-winning novel is set during the Allied occupation of Japan immediately after the end of World War II.

popular novel—particularly with teens and women in their twenties. The differences between this and his other novels is often noted; Brooke Horvath, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, states that the book "is less startling than [*A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Hard-Boiled Wonderland*], a quieter novel, but no less rewarding."

When he wrote this "straight boy-meets-girl story," as Murakami describes it, many readers felt it to be "a retreat, a betrayal of what my works had stood for until then. For me personally, however, it was just the opposite: it was an adventure, a challenge. I had never written that kind of straight, simple story, and I wanted to test myself." This simple and often humorous style makes Murakami's works products of a new sensibility: his stories are liberated from the ghosts of World War II and are far removed from the traditional Japanese mainstream of autobiographical realism.

### Responses to Literature

1. Besides several other conventions, Murakami uses some involved symbolism in his novels. In his first works, he features a character who is the Rat; in his *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), he introduces Boku's search for sheep and eventual encounter with the Sheep Man. With a team of your classmates, come to your own interpretations of such symbols, each student choosing one to research, study, and identify. It might be helpful to consult a literary dictionary, a dream encyclopedia, or even Eastern astrology or cultural symbol references—to come up with what each symbolic element represents.
2. Consider one story or novel by Murakami and identify and discuss several ways in which Murakami

establishes one character's identity—his own or that of his culture—and where that identity takes on new characteristics from a second culture. Cite examples from the texts.

3. Some of Murakami's works are considered to be the kind of novel called a *Bildungsroman*—a building novel, or novel of personal development and growth. *Kafka on the Shore* (2002), for example, is a Bildungsroman about the quest for love and independence. Do some minor research on the term *Bildungsroman*. Then, consider how your own life would make a fine *Bildungsroman*: Trace the events and experiences that lead you on a quest (even a short-term one), facing challenges that changed you, and coming “home” to the society that now accepts you. How did you grow? How did you mature to fit in with society? Then, explain how *Kafka on the Shore* is a *Bildungsroman* by tracing the personal growth of either the teenaged Kafka or the elder Nakata. Do a time line or create a storyboard if it helps—to trace the character's maturation process. Compare your personal story with Kafka's or Nakata's story of personal development. Where are the two of you alike? Where do you differ? How are you both products of the *Bildungsroman*?

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## Iris Murdoch

BORN: 1919, Dublin, Ireland

DIED: 1999, Oxford, England

NATIONALITY: Irish

GENRE: Novels, essays, poems, plays

#### MAJOR WORKS:

- Under the Net* (1954)  
*The Sandcastle* (1957)  
*A Severed Head* (1961)  
*The Black Prince* (1973)  
*The Sea, the Sea* (1978)

## Overview

One of the most prolific writers of the second half of the twentieth century, Iris Murdoch wrote well-crafted fiction containing rich characters and complex plots woven together with elements from philosophy and psychology. In addition to more than two dozen novels, her body of work includes several plays and an assortment of critical studies. She was nominated for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize six times and eventually won the honor for *The Sea, the Sea* in 1978. Murdoch's achievements in philosophy have often been overshadowed by her reputation as a novelist and dramatist. Her philosophical and literary works are closely interrelated: Her novels and plays can be read as meditations on the problems about



Iris Murdoch Murdoch, Iris, 1966, photograph. Horst Tappe / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

freedom, consciousness, and the nature of the good that she addresses in her philosophical writings. Murdoch herself, in a 1978 interview with Bryan Magee, stressed the unity of her philosophical and literary work when she remarked that “philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities.”

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Academics and Existentialism** Jean Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin on July 15, 1919, to Wills John Hughes Murdoch, a civil servant, and Irene Alice Richardson Murdoch. A few years later, the family moved to London, where Murdoch began her education at the Froebel Institute; she was a boarding student at Badminton School in Bristol from age twelve to eighteen. In 1938, she won a scholarship for three years at Somerville College of the University of Oxford. There she became engaged to a classmate, Frank Thompson, who was killed early in World War II. Extremely left-wing politically, Murdoch was briefly a member of the British Communist Party. She graduated with first-class honors in “Greats” (ancient history, classics, and philosophy) in 1942. She was an assistant principal in the British Treasury from 1942 to 1944. Between 1944 and 1946 she was an administrative officer with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in London, Belgium, and Austria. This experience had a profound effect on her as a philosopher and as a novelist. During this time she read the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, and she later met Sartre in Brussels.

In 1947, Murdoch received a Sarah Smithson Studentship to study philosophy at Newnham College of the University of Cambridge. That same year she was elected to the Aristotelian Society. Her early philosophical influences included Sartre; the Austrian linguist and philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom she met at Cambridge; and Wittgenstein’s student—and later, translator, editor, and literary executor—G. E. M. Anscombe, with whom she formed a lifelong friendship. Denied a visa to enter the United States (where she had been offered a scholarship) because of her previous membership in the Communist Party, Murdoch in 1948 became a tutor in philosophy and a fellow of St. Anne’s College of the University of Oxford. Murdoch published several philosophical studies during the early 1950s, including one of Sartre, a philosopher with whom she has often been compared. In 1956, Murdoch married John Bayley, a novelist and lecturer.

**Turning to Fiction** Murdoch wrote more than fifty novels. The first was *Under the Net* (1954), about a man who fails in his personal relationships because he sees the world as a hostile place. Her second novel, *The Flight*

### LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Murdoch’s famous contemporaries include:

- Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980): French existentialist philosopher and novelist.
- Simone Weil** (1909–1943): French philosopher and political activist.
- Penelope Fitzgerald** (1916–2000): Novelist and essayist who won the Booker Prize the year after Murdoch did.
- Anthony Burgess** (1917–1993): Prolific British novelist famous for the dystopian novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962).
- Fidel Castro** (1928–): Cuban revolutionary leader and president of communist Cuba from 1959 until 2008.

from the *Enchanter* (1956), is about a rich and powerful protagonist who sees all human relationships as power struggles and uses his power to draw the other characters into his grasp. Murdoch’s third novel, *The Sandcastle* (1957), deals with an individual who attempts to free himself from what he considers the death of him: his marriage. *The Bell* (1958), has a similar theme, except that a young woman decides not to go back to her mate so that she may find herself.

Many of Murdoch’s later novels contain themes that are rewritten from her earlier works. For example, *A Severed Head* (1961) examines the extent to which human relationships—in this case, sexual ones—are damaged when they are used to overpower others, a theme also explored in *Flight from the Enchanter*. *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), like *The Sandcastle*, features a hero who feels enslaved by his marriage. Murdoch often wrote novels that involved the fantasy of freedom versus conventional responsibility and the difficulty of establishing relationships. Also characteristic of much of her late work is the brooding, dreamlike landscapes and the bizarre turns of plot that prompted many critics to refer to her as a Gothic novelist.

In her later years, Murdoch continued to write rather lengthy, complex novels. Her later titles were *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1982), *The Good Apprentice* (1986), and *The Green Knight* (1993). Murdoch died on February 8, 1999, in Oxford, England, after a five-year battle with Alzheimer’s disease.

### Works in Literary Context

**Master and Servant** Murdoch relied heavily on philosophy and politics to give substance to her depictions of human relationships. Several of Murdoch’s works revolve around a manipulative character who achieves power and

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Murdoch's literature centers around her philosophical interests; her characters often confront ethical issues and have relationship struggles that come about as a result of their beliefs. Here are some other works in which characters wrestle with ethical issues:

*The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. In this American classic set in a seventeenth-century Puritan community, heroine Hester Prynne gives birth out of wedlock, refuses to name the child's father, and suffers the consequences for her "crime" alone.

*Crime and Punishment* (1866), a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In this tale, a Russian student named Raskolnikov murders a pawnbroker and then becomes increasingly paranoid.

*The Stranger* (1942), a novel by Albert Camus. This classic work is a philosophical novel in which the main character kills a man for no reason and must deal with the ethical consequences.

*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), a film directed by Luis Buñuel. This French surrealistic film concerns a group of friends and their dreams.

control over the lives of others. For example, her first novel, *Under the Net*, focuses on Jake Donoghue, who attempts to establish a pattern for his life in order to insulate himself from the impact of random happenings, which are not part of his design. The lives of most of the characters in *The Flight from the Enchanter* are determined by how they respond to a charismatic and domineering "enchanter" who preys upon their personal obsessions. Murdoch introduces supernatural elements into this work that illuminate her examination of myth and reality. *The Black Prince* (1973) blends a murder mystery with ruminations on creativity by centering on an aged writer who attempts to impose his fantasies on others. Several critics have noted parallels between this work and such Shakespeare plays as *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*; in fact, many of Murdoch's works involve characters whose relationships resemble that of the domineering Prospero and the servile Caliban in *The Tempest*.

**Unhealthy Love and Loss of Faith** Murdoch explores various forms of love throughout her fiction, generally in bleak depictions of relationships. *A Severed Head* addresses such topics as promiscuity, self-deception, and the unpredictable actions of individuals in love by detailing the interactions of three groups of characters who share progressive attitudes toward sex. *The Sea, the Sea* depicts a man who sustains an obsessive love for a girl he knew during childhood. When they meet again years

later, the man uses his expertise as a magician and theater director to interfere in her happy marriage. In addition to her exploration of themes relating to love, Murdoch frequently examines spiritual issues. *The Bell* (1958), for example, is set in a religious community and involves conflicts among characters with diverse personalities, and a central character in *Henry and Cato* (1976) is a Catholic priest who gradually loses his faith.

**Art and Philosophy** Murdoch's complementary interests in philosophy and art are also evidenced in her nonfiction writings. For example, her *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) examines the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre by focusing on his use of the novel as a means of developing and exploring philosophical ideas, a recurring trait in Murdoch's novels as well. Among her other theoretical works, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (1977) expounds upon Plato's views of art, while *Acostas: Two Platonic Dialogues* (1986) involves several characters who discuss the role of art in human life.

### Works in Critical Context

Murdoch never read any of her reviews. Her books, though often controversial, generally enjoyed positive critical reception. Nicholas Spice has stated: "Like Henry James's, Iris Murdoch's style is high, in the sense that she writes about lofty matters—the nature of morality, the reasons for existence, how we should live and love, how we should die." The complexities of her plots and the interrelationships she develops among characters have led critics to compare Murdoch's novels with those of such nineteenth-century writers as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Charles Dickens. While Murdoch writes primarily in the realist mode, many of her works describe supernatural events that lend allegorical and symbolic implications to her themes. Murdoch has explained: "In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together, and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them."

**Early Works** Between 1954 and 1987, Murdoch published twenty-three novels that explore various types of love, the relationship between imagination and reality, the role of art, and moral issues and dilemmas pertaining to questions of good and evil. By developing diverse scenarios and characters and presenting fantasies and supernatural events, Murdoch examines abstract ideas within the context of human drama. Michael Levenson has commented: "Murdoch, a philosophic novelist, spurns the idea of the philosophic novel. This is because she believes that fiction should shiver like the quicksilver of life. She wants a fiction that can engage with urgencies and accidents."

A critic has commented about one book: "Naturally, this being a Murdoch novel, nothing is so simple as it might appear to be. While *Nuns and Soldiers* works wonderfully as

an archetypal tale of love triumphant, it presents dozens of other possibilities.... This is an exceptionally full book, packed with ideas, symbols, references, questionings, and with characters who, more than usually in Murdoch's novels, seem caught in the real web of life."

## Responses to Literature

1. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about the philosophical and literary movement known as existentialism. Are Murdoch's works existentialist? If so, how so? If not, how not?
2. Read *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*. What roles does Murdoch think the artist has in society? Do these roles of the artist exist today? Has the artist's role diminished? Is the artist no longer an archetypal figure? Write an essay detailing your position.
3. In *The Bell*, the characters struggle with the problems that arise when their human desires conflict with their moral beliefs. Pick a few scenes in the novel in which characters choose to favor one or the other—to follow their hearts, or to stick to their moral absolutes. Do you agree with these choices? Why or why not?

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## Les Murray

BORN: 1938, Nabiac, New South Wales, Australia

NATIONALITY: Australian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

### MAJOR WORKS:

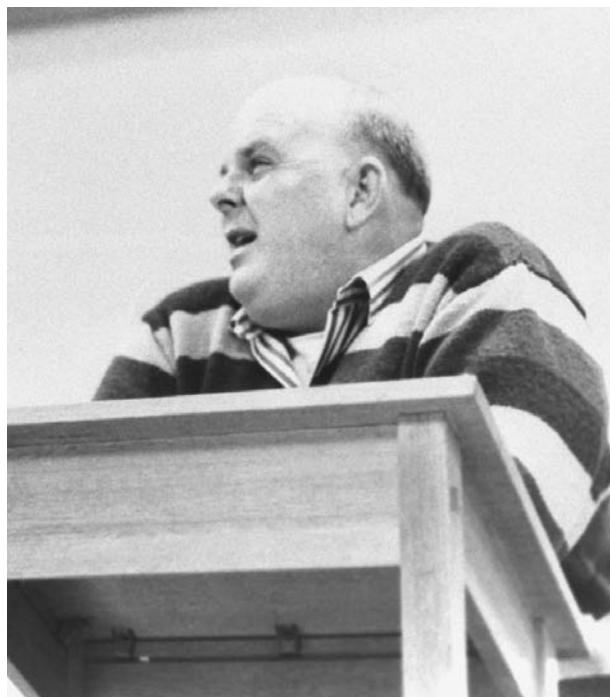
- Poems Against Economics* (1972)  
 "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday-Song Cycle" (1976)  
*The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980)  
*Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1993)  
*Fredy Neptune* (1998)

## Overview

Les Murray is a prominent Australian poet and one of the foremost Australian literary critics. For decades, this author of seventeen volumes of verse, five books of literary essays, and many influential editions has helped shape the Australian literary landscape and has been one of the most authoritative literary voices in national debates on a variety of issues.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Meager Beginnings and Early Tragedy** Leslie Allan Murray was born on October 17, 1938, in Nabiac, on the central coast of New South Wales, to Cecil and Miriam (née Arnall) Murray. Cecil was a struggling dairy farmer whose 150 acres were owned by his domineering father; Miriam had trained as a nurse in Newcastle. Murray was raised in a family home that was little more than a shed with wooden walls, an iron roof, and only three



Les Murray Murray, Les, photograph by Peter McFarlane. Reproduced by permission.

rooms. The boy's childhood was devoid of luxuries and had few comforts.

Although his father was nearly illiterate, Murray learned to read at age four. He was homeschooled by his mother until age nine, when he went to a local rural school at Bulby Brush. He began attending high school in 1951, but his education was disrupted by a great trauma: His mother died in April of that year. Murray's father suffered a nervous breakdown and ceased to care for the farm, himself, or his son. Murray did not return to school until 1952, then dropped out again after a year; he lived with his slowly recovering father in considerable squalor, spending his days outside or reading on his own.

**High School Traumas and College Depression**  
From 1955 through 1956, he attended Taree High School, where he did well academically but felt himself shunned and mocked by his peers. His weightlifter's build saved him from physical bullying, but he was socially ostracized for two years. He carried these lifelong psychological scars, and some of his most vivid poems feature these experiences.

In his last year at high school, Murray wrote his first poems. In 1957, he entered University of Sydney with a Commonwealth Scholarship. There he edited student journals, catching the attention of a group of established poets that included Clive James, Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes, Mungo MacCallum, and Laurie Oakes.

Murray disregarded his schoolwork and instead focused on reading the contents of the university's Fisher Library. As a boy, he had begun studying German in his spare time, and at the University of Sydney, learned several more languages, mastering more than a dozen by age twenty-five. He was also publishing a steady output of quality verse in student publications and became a prominent figure in the literary life of the university.

By the end of 1959, however, Murray sank into a depression connected with his mother's death and his own feelings of isolation. In 1961, he dropped out of college and, living hand-to-mouth, hitchhiked around Australia. He was partially rescued from utter devastation by two events: his return to the university in 1962 and meeting fellow student Valerie Gina Morelli. Murray proposed to her in April 1962, and they were married on September 29, 1962.

**Lucrative Career and Early Writing Success**  
While working as a translator of Western European languages with the Australian National University in Canberra, Murray continued writing. In 1965, nearly coinciding with the birth of the first of his five children, he published *The Ilex Tree*, a book of poetry written jointly with Geoffrey Lehmann. The volume was well received by the critics and won the Grace Leven Prize for poetry. This success brought him in contact with

other established poets and the chief publisher of Australian poetry, Angus & Robertson.

**Changing Jobs** In 1967, Murray resigned from his translation job to move his family to Britain, supported by his first Commonwealth Literary Fellowship. On their return to Sydney in 1968, he took temporary jobs, ranging from a clerkship in the prime minister's office to a railway laborer job, to support his poetry career. By 1971, he was confident in his ability to earn money from both his writing and Valerie's teaching to declare himself a full-time freelance author. From that point, the flow of his poetic publications was copious and rapid. In 1972, *Poems Against Economics* garnered mixed reviews but confirmed his growing reputation and generated further support: the Commonwealth Literary Fund sent him on a lecture tour of Western Australia. Thereafter, the Literary Fund and its successor, the Literature Board of the Australia Council, supported Murray generously over many years.

The establishment of the Literature Board owed something to Murray's own persuasive writing on the subject of government support for writers; by 1970, Murray was publishing the first of a long series of essays on issues related to publicly funded art. His essays appeared in major newspapers and journals, such as *Quadrant*, and were eventually published in a five-volume collection.

In 1973, Murray took over as director of the journal *Poetry Australia*—which he continued to edit until 1980. In 1978, he became the sole poetry reader for Angus & Robertson. His editorial work put him at the center of the “poetry wars” that so enlivened the Australian literary scene during the 1970s and 1980s.

**Aboriginal Culture and the Verse Novel** In 1976, Murray wrote *Selected Poems: The Vernacular Republic* as well as an extraordinary cycle of poems, “The Buladelah-Taree Holiday-Song Cycle”—written as the oldest verbal manifestations of Australian rural culture, Aboriginal oral poetry. The Jindyworobak poets of the 1940s had been mocked for their weak understanding of Aboriginal culture, and Murray took a great risk with this daringly experimental poem: Critics were waiting to accuse him of cultural arrogance, or ignorance, or daring to speak for Aboriginal people. But, his work was triumphant, reinforcing both his powers as a poet and his knowledge as a scholar of Aboriginal culture, and rewarding his refusal to admit the inevitability of cultural apartheid in Australia.

Murray's increasing interest in Aboriginal Australians inspired another kind of work, the truly long narrative poem. Declining to call it an epic, he published *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* as a “verse novel” in 1979. In this work, Murray also attended to his notion of what he considered the “collapse of masculinity” by featuring a look at feminism through the figure of Noeline Kampff, a two-dimensional caricature of the feminists he met,

mainly on university campuses, in the late 1970s. By creating Kampff, Murray offered himself as a target for feminists: For years, he was hounded on campuses by demonstrators who disrupted his talks, displayed posters attacking him, wrote obscene comments in lipstick in the staff toilet, and sent him anonymous envelopes of excrement. By contrast, the reviews for *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* were mostly respectful; and when the work was published in Great Britain and America, it received enthusiastic welcome. The book also won Murray the Grace Leven Prize in 1980.

In 1982 and onward, Murray's verse was routinely published overseas following its Australian appearances and to much acclaim. By 1985, he had won numerous awards for his poetry, including the 1984 National Book Council Prize and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. He also established his status as a critic in his own right, publishing several volumes of collected essays. In 1985, he made a bold statement about his connection to the bush by moving from the Chatswood home in Sydney where he had stayed since 1971 to Forty Acres, land he had bought in his ancestral valley near Bunyah. There, he built a small house within sight of the spot on which he had been raised.

**Reawakened Distress and Supreme Success** After a party in 1988, where Murray met a woman who had been one of his teenaged persecutors at Taree High School, he was reminded of the dark days following his mother's death and fell into a deep depression: This time what he called "the black dog" hung on for years. His position as poetry reader for Angus & Robertson came to an end in 1990, partly because of this psychological stress.

But, even as he descended into familiar depression, Murray continued to write, publish to great acclaim, and earn numerous esteemed honors and awards, including the 1993 New South Wales Premier Prize. His depression culminated in July 1996, when he was rushed to a hospital in Newcastle with a liver abscess from which he nearly died. After many days in a coma he regained consciousness to find a mountain of sympathetic mail and the depression gone.

Murray's next volume, *Subhuman Redneck Poems* (1996), became a hit, selling more than ten thousand copies in Australia. The work was also a great critical success; and, it won Murray the premier British poetry award, the T. S. Eliot Prize. The work was such a sensation that television news helicopters thwacked the skies above Forty Acres and floated down into the paddocks around the little weatherboard house as journalists competed for interviews.

In 1998, the epic narrative poem *Fredy Neptune*, which Murray had been writing since 1991, was published in sections and was recognized immediately as one of his greatest achievements. Les Murray continues to write, travel, give readings, and lecture. His reputation

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Murray's famous contemporaries include:

**Sawako Ariyoshi** (1931–1984): Ariyoshi was a prolific Japanese novelist whose works concerned significant social issues such as environmental pollution and treatment of the elderly.

**Graham Chapman** (1941–1989): Chapman was a core member of the English comedy troupe Monty Python.

**Elgar Howarth** (1935–): Howarth is a world-renowned English conductor, composer, and former trumpet player.

**Wilma Rudolph** (1940–1994): A 1960 Olympian, she became the first American woman to win three gold medals (in track and field) in a single Olympic season.

**John Updike** (1932–): An award-winning novelist, essayist, and literary critic, he is often appreciated for his in-depth chronicling of American psychological, social, and political cultures.

still grows both nationally and internationally, and his name has been both honored and recommended for such esteemed spots as chair of poetry at Oxford and Poet Laureate of Britain.

### Works in Literary Context

**Influences of Australia on Style and Theme** As one who objects to the pervasive influence of British culture on Australian society, Murray expresses a strong sense of nationalism in his work. He celebrates his homeland by exploring Australia's wildlife, vegetation, and aboriginal folklore. Living in the countryside that has inspired so much of his work, Murray has stated, "I like poetry because it isn't tied exclusively to the human. One may write about trees, mountains, the future, the heavens, because it is understood that one is also writing about the human whatever the ostensible subject."

While Murray's themes are typically provincial, his keen perceptions and creative use of language have attracted a wide audience. *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980), for example, is an experimental narrative which takes the form of a sonnet. Focused on the theme of maturation or emphasizing the natural world, Murray's poetry is distinguished by its wit and verbal ease and has been praised for its efforts to establish a uniquely Australian viewpoint.

### Works in Critical Context

By the time of the publication of *Poems Against Economics* (1972), with two volumes already behind him, Murray had been typecast, both by his supporters and by critics:

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by poets and authors who also wrote on themes involving their homelands:

*Another Country* (1962), a novel by James Baldwin. In this modern work, the author explores the Greenwich Village, New York, life, including the damages of racism and the consequences of hedonism.

*Death of a Naturalist* (1966), a poetry collection by Seamus Heaney. In this volume, the poet reflects on childhood, identity, and the settings of rural Ireland.

*Hunger of Memory* (2004), an autobiography by Richard Rodriguez. In this nonfiction work, the author revisits his experiences as a Mexican American.

*Nectar in a Sieve* (1955), a novel by Kamala Markandaya. In this award-winning novel, the author presents an in-depth look at the culture clashes between urban and rural Indians.

He was the poet of the countryside in subject matter and a conservative in style—straightforward and accessible.

**Poems Against Economics** While *Poems Against Economics* unsettled both those views and his sometimes polemical slant has drawn the fire of several critics, more often Murray is hailed for the creativity and technical excellence of his poems. In his assessment of the work, James Tulip writes, “Les Murray doesn’t go to the country for his philosophy. His philosophy drives him there. *Poems Against Economics* is the active stand which Murray is taking in terms of belief and judgment about Australia today.... Murray is aggressively for the folk and their culture.” In reviewing Murray’s *Poems the Size of Photographs* critic David McCooey wrote, “Part Banjo Paterson, part Emily Dickinson, Murray is a traditional poet whose work is radically original.” In reviewing two later collections, *The Daylight Moon* and *The Vernacular Republic*, Nobel Prize-winning poet Derek Walcott hailed Murray as a candidate for “the bard of modern Australia.”

### Responses to Literature

- Some of Murray’s most vivid poems focus on his experience of group cruelty at Taree High School—among them “A Torturer’s Apprenticeship” (published in *Dog Fox Field*, 1990) and “Burning Want” (published in *Subhuman Redneck Poems*, 1993). After a close reading of one or more of these poems, write your own poem about a high school experience

that has influenced you. Include dialogue, descriptions, or unique feelings. Consider how this experience has shaped who you are today.

- In a group effort, research the 1950s in Australia. What did the period offer to the teens of that time? What trends characterized their recreation, social habits and values, and likes and dislikes? Does Murray reflect any of this in his poetry? If so, what does his referencing say about his attitude toward the popular culture of his teen years? If not, what does he use instead: What is important to him in his early poetry?
- Using resources from the Internet or your library, investigate Australia—its history, geography, culture, and people. Then, read two or three poems by Murray. Write an essay about how Murray’s poetry reflects Australia. For example, how does the country contribute to the imagery? Does this imagery help to characterize the people? How does the use of Australia contribute to Murray’s themes? How much more does a reader know about Australia after reading a Murray poem or work?

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altered by their encounters with Trinidad. The book mixes elements of Naipaul's fiction and nonfiction, drawing on his Indian and West Indian heritage, along with British history and culture, to reveal the complex impact of British imperialism on the sensibilities and memories of individuals.

***Snubs and Honors*** In February 1996, Patricia Naipaul died. That April, Naipaul married Nadira Khanum Alvi, a Pakistani journalist whom he had met while on a speaking tour. Naipaul—who for some time had been associated with conservative politics in England and the United States—began to speak more aggressively on behalf of Hindu nationalism, generally taking the line of India's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party. India has long been marked by sectarian violence between its Hindu and Muslim citizens, and Naipaul's siding with the Hindu faction stirred more controversy.

On October 11, 2001, it was announced that Naipaul had won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Naipaul has continued to write prolifically since receiving the prize, despite advancing age. He has claimed, though, that *Magic Seeds* (2004) is his last novel.

## Works in Literary Context

***Influence of Conrad*** One author Naipaul has publicly cited as an influence is Joseph Conrad, another British immigrant (from Poland) whose novels forced the British, and the world, to examine the disturbing implications of empire. Critics have noted that the dark, brooding atmosphere, tropical settings, and alienated perspective in Naipaul's prose resemble similar qualities in Conrad's writing, including the latter's most famous work of fiction, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). As in that work, some of Naipaul's European characters come emotionally undone as their pretensions are exposed in the alien African setting. *A Bend in the River* bears direct comparison with *Heart of Darkness* in the journey each work's protagonist undertakes. However, some critics have interpreted Naipaul's work as a defense of the colonial project rather than an indictment of its bitter consequences.

***Literature of Displacement*** Naipaul has contributed richly to the body of modern literature dealing with the theme of displacement, exile, and rootlessness, as dealt with by major authors such as James Joyce, Albert Camus, Ezra Pound, Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, and Conrad. This theme is embodied in characters such as Salim in *A Bend in the River*, an Indian Muslim living in Africa who is treated like an outsider during his country's political upheaval. It is also shown in the story "One out of Many" from *In a Free State*, in which an Indian servant finds himself in New York and realizes he is utterly lost regarding matters of money and law in the strange land.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Naipaul's famous contemporaries include:

**Derek Walcott** (1930–): Trinidadian poet and playwright, 1992 Nobel laureate in literature.

**Nelson Mandela** (1918–): former president of South Africa; imprisoned for twenty-seven years by the apartheid regime.

**Julius Nyerere** (1922–1999): First president of Tanzania (previously Tanganyika); served from 1964 to 1985.

**Gore Vidal** (1925–): American novelist and essayist.

***A Towering Figure*** The extent of V. S. Naipaul's influence is large. His carefully observed, forcefully worded assessments of social and political life in such geographically disparate locations as central Africa, the West Indies, the Americas, India, and the Islamic world are widely studied and cited. For example, scholars have asserted (ruefully) that since World War II, no single text has influenced popular views of the politics and culture of Argentina more than Naipaul's *The Return of Eva Peron*. Indeed, the whole genre of contemporary travel journalism, of which Paul Theroux is a leading exponent, is substantially indebted to his work. Authors from all parts of the world have claimed him as an influence.

## Works in Critical Context

Naipaul is widely acknowledged as one of the giants of contemporary literature. He is admired for his command of language and dialect, his acuity of observation and detail, and for his insights into the way human beings internalize and live out the effects of social and geopolitical conditions. Others have accused him of being unduly pessimistic. For example, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, another Nobel laureate, derided his fellow West Indian as "V. S. Nightfall" in his poem "The Spoiler's Return."

***A Bend in the River* (1979)** When *A Bend in the River* was published in 1979, Naipaul was already known for his bleak themes and subject matter. Irving Howe, in a *New York Times* review for the book, states, "Naipaul seems right now to be a writer beleaguered by his own truths, unable to get past them.... Perhaps we ought simply to be content that, in his austere and brilliant way, he holds fast to the bitterness before his eyes." However, many critics saw in the novel a slightly refined and less bitter perspective than his previous works. Charles R. Larson, writing for the *Chronicle Review*, asserts that the book "shows us the mellowing of one of our greatest contemporary writers." Benny Green, in a

# N-Q

## Vladimir Nabokov

BORN: 1899, Saint Petersburg, Russia

DIED: 1977, Montreaux, Switzerland

NATIONALITY: Russian-American

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*King, Queen, Knave* (1928)

*Speak, Memory* (1951)

*Lolita* (1955)

*Pale Fire* (1962)

*Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969)

### Overview

Novelist, literary critic, chess enthusiast, and butterfly expert, Vladimir Nabokov left behind a body of work characterized by a love of language and wordplay. Although his style markedly changed over time, becoming increasingly less lyrical, all his works are marked by a complex and sophisticated attention to detail. He achieved worldwide fame in 1955 with his highly controversial *Lolita*, the story of a middle-aged man's love affair with a twelve-year-old "nymphet."

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Family with Liberal Leanings** Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on April 22, 1899, to Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, a distinguished jurist known for his liberal political views, and Elena Ivanovna Rukavishnikova. Nabokov's father was an Anglophile, and the family had a leaning toward English products that included not only English soap and syrup but also a series of English governesses. As a result, Nabokov initially learned to speak English better than Russian.

**A Numb Fury of Verse-Making** Nabokov's parents encouraged him to follow his mind and imagination. He played with language and linguistics, mathematics, puzzles and games, including chess, and sports from soccer to boxing to tennis. Interested in butterflies, he became a recognized entomological authority while still young and remained a noted butterfly expert his entire life. Nabokov began to write poems when he was thirteen and, as he described it, "the numb fury of verse-making first came over me." He began writing poems in Russian, French, and English, but his real passion for writing poetry began in 1914.

**Fleeing Revolutionary Russia** Nabokov's father, a lawyer who edited St. Petersburg's only liberal newspaper, rebelled against first the czarist regime, then against the communists. He was an active member of the *Duma* (the Russian parliament) until he was briefly jailed and stripped of his political rights in 1908 for signing a manifesto opposing conscription. In February of 1917, at the height of World War I and in the midst of a chaotic military mutiny, the *Duma* seized power, thus creating the Russian provisional government. Later that same year, Vladimir Lenin led the Bolsheviks in overthrowing this new governing body, thus inciting a bloody civil war. The Russian Revolution, as these two events are called, marked the transfer of governing power from the czarist autocracy to the Soviet Union, ending the Russian Empire. After the Russian Revolution, deprived of their land and fortune, the family fled Russia for London in 1919, where Nabokov and his brother entered Cambridge University. At Cambridge, Nabokov graduated with honors in 1922 and rejoined his family in Berlin in the wake of an unexpected tragedy. Nabokov's father was assassinated in Berlin by Russian monarchists as he tried to shelter their real target, Pavel Milyukov, a leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party-in-exile.

**Romance and Marriage** After relocating to Berlin permanently, Nabokov received some income from public readings and from his publications, which included not



Vladimir Nabokov *Nabokov, Vladimir, photograph. Gertrude Fehr / Pix Inc. / Time and Life Pictures / Getty Images.*

only literary works but also journalistic pieces and chess problems, but he found a more reliable means of support in providing instruction in French and English to students, primarily Russians. A romance with Svetlana Sievert, the subject of several of his poems, was terminated in January 1923 by her parents, who had insisted that he obtain a steady job as a condition for becoming engaged to their daughter. A few months later, he met his future wife, Véra Slonim, at a charity ball. Sensitive and intelligent, she could recite Nabokov's poetry by heart and became indispensable to him.

Nabokov married Slonim in 1925. In the fall, Nabokov wrote his first novel, *Mary* (1926). Based on Nabokov's relationship with Valentina Shulgina (Nabokov's first love), *Mary* is perhaps the most poetic novel Nabokov ever wrote. The original Russian version of the book received little attention, but after Nabokov's reputation burgeoned and the work was translated into English, *Mary* received closer critical attention.

**Growing Literary Reputation and Travel** As his literary reputation grew, Nabokov traveled extensively throughout Europe, visiting his siblings and giving readings of his work. In 1937, he obtained permission for his family to relocate to France. It was at this time that Nabokov began to experiment with English, translating his Russian novel *Otchayanie* (1934) into the English *Despair* in 1937. After Adolf Hitler rose to power in

Germany, the Nabokovs fled the Nazi advance into France in 1940 and sailed to the United States.

#### ***Early Days in America: A Series of Professorships***

His next book, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), was written in English and marks the demise of the use of the pen name V. Sirin and the emergence of Vladimir Nabokov, an American writer. In 1940, Nabokov taught Slavic languages at Stanford University. From 1941 to 1948, he taught at Wellesley College and became a professor of literature. He was also a research fellow in entomology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University from 1942 to 1948 and later discovered several butterfly species and subspecies, including "Nabokov's wood nymph." A Guggenheim fellowship in 1943 resulted in his scholarly 1944 biographical study of Russian author Nikolai Gogol. Nabokov became an American citizen in 1945 and by then was a regular contributor to popular magazines.

In 1949 Nabokov was appointed professor of Russian and European literature at Cornell University, where he taught until 1959. In 1951 he published the memoir of his early life in Russia, *Speak, Memory*. Six years later, several short sketches published in the *New Yorker* were incorporated into *Pnin* (1957), his novel about a Russian émigré teaching at an American university.

***Lolita Brings Notoriety*** Despite Nabokov's vast productivity, scholarly status, and high standing in literary circles, Nabokov did not gain widespread popularity until the publication of *Lolita*. The story of a middle-aged man's obsessive and disastrous lust for a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, *Lolita* is widely considered one of the most controversial novels of the twentieth century. Rejected by four American publishers because of its pedophilic subject matter, the book was finally published by Olympia Press, a Parisian firm that specialized in pornography and erotica. *Lolita* attracted a wide underground readership, and tourists began transporting copies of the work abroad. While U.S. Customs permitted this action, the British government pressured the French legislature to confiscate the remaining copies of the book and forbid further sales. However, the English author Graham Greene located a copy and, in a pivotal *London Times* article, focused on the novel's language rather than its content, designating *Lolita* one of the ten best books of 1955. Public curiosity and controversy fueled the book's popularity, and in 1958 it was published in the United States. Within five weeks, *Lolita* was the most celebrated novel in the nation and remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for over a year.

Nabokov sold the film rights and wrote the screenplay for the 1962 movie directed by Stanley Kubrick. With royalties from the novel and the film, Nabokov was able to quit teaching and devote himself entirely to his writing and to butterfly hunting.

In 1959 Nabokov published *Invitation to a Beheading*, a story of a man awaiting execution, which he had

first written in Russian in 1938. In 1960 he and his family moved to Montreux, Switzerland. Nabokov received critical acclaim for *Pale Fire* (1962), a strange, multidimensional exercise in the techniques of parable and parody, written as a 999-line poem with a lengthy commentary by a demented New England scholar who is actually an exiled mythical king.

In his seventieth year, Nabokov produced his last major work, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), a sexually explicit tale of incest, twice as long as any other novel he had written and, according to the *New York Times's* John Leonard, "fourteen times as complicated." An immediate best seller, *Ada* evoked a wide array of critical response, ranging from strong objections to the highest praise. While the value of the novel was debated, *Ada* was universally acknowledged as a work of enormous ambition that represented the culmination of all that Nabokov had attempted to accomplish in his writing over the years.

Nabokov died on July 2, 1977, at the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, where he had lived since 1959.

### Works in Literary Context

Nabokov stated that his fiction expresses his passionate regard for human feelings and morality. Yet, some critics have accused Nabokov of being indifferent to social and political issues of his time, comparing his stories and novels to elegantly constructed, labyrinth-like narratives and riddles. This similarity is largely because of Nabokov's curious ability to combine his passion for literature with his strong interest in chess and crosswords. Many of Nabokov's stories share the motifs, themes, and techniques of his larger narratives and function as "little tragedies," with some mythological, psychological, and metaphysical overtones. While he has been compared to author Joseph Conrad by some critics, Nabokov was critical of other prominent authors and rejected such comparisons. It was the authors he read in his youth, like Aleksandr Blok, that exerted the most influence on his poetic works.

**Themes in *Lolita*** It has been suggested that the character Dolores, whom Nabokov's antihero Humbert Humbert idealizes as "Lolita," represents the superficiality of American culture viewed from a sophisticated European perspective. While other literary scholars do not deny this interpretation, they view an examination of the effects of the artist's antisocial impulses in addition to *Lolita's* satirical vision of American morals and values. Several commentators maintained that the accusations of pornography stemmed from Nabokov's lack of moral commentary regarding Humbert's actions, while some argued that the true crime of the novel is not the murder Humbert commits but his cutting short of Lolita's childhood. Critics feel that Lolita is not entirely blameless, however, for at twelve she is already sexually active, and, despite Humbert's extravagant designs, it is she who first

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Nabokov's famous contemporaries include:

**Stanley Kubrick** (1928–1999): Few American directors were as simultaneously revolutionary and popular as Kubrick. His films—most based on novels—are meticulously constructed masterpieces that push the boundaries of cinematic vision.

**Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** (1918–2008): Russian novelist and dramatist best known for his exposé of the Soviet system of political prison camps, or *gulags*. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, Solzhenitsyn was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1974.

**Vladimir Mayakovsky** (1893–1930): Russian futurist poet, he coauthored the 1912 declaration *A Slap in the Face to Public Taste*. As a futurist, his work focused on the dynamic, hectic pace of modern life and tearing down old social orders and authority figures.

**Georgia O'Keeffe** (1887–1986): American visual artist most closely associated with the American Southwest. O'Keeffe is best known for her paintings of flowers, rocks, shells, animal bones, and landscapes that synthesize abstraction and representation.

**Jack Kerouac** (1922–1969): A leading voice among the so-called Beat Generation, a loose association of poets, writers, and musicians that revolted against the conformity of post-World War II America, Kerouac is best known for his stream-of-consciousness travelogue, *On the Road*.

seduces him. Lolita's character, as well as other characterizations in the novel, have won Nabokov consistent, unified praise for his ability to evoke both revulsion and sympathy in the reader. For example, it is generally agreed that Lolita has a truly unattractive personality, yet her unhappy life inspires compassion. Humbert is a pedophile and murderer but wins the reader's appreciation for his humor and brutal honesty, while Charlotte, Dolores's mother, is depicted as both a piranha and a pawn.

Throughout *Lolita*, Nabokov challenges the reader. The novel's foreword, written by "John Ray, Jr., PhD," a bogus Freudian psychiatrist, introduces Humbert's confession through overly complex psychological jargon, which Nabokov hated. Unwitting readers believe the foreword is sincere, especially because of *Lolita's* controversial subject matter. Nabokov's myriad uses of anagrams, coded poetry, and puns provide clues concerning Lolita's mysterious lover. Nabokov also parodies numerous styles of literature in *Lolita*; it is at times viewed as a satire of the confessional novel, the detective novel, the romance novel, and, most frequently, as an allegory of the artistic process.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Nabokov often employed emotionally detached, unreliable narrators in his stories, most notably in *Lolita*. Other writers stretching back to the nineteenth century have approached their stories in a similar fashion; strongly rooted in Russian literature, the technique later became widespread in both fiction and film during the twentieth century. Here are some other works that share Nabokov's detachment:

*The Stranger* (1942), a novel by Albert Camus. One of the best known works of absurdist fiction, *The Stranger* features an emotionally detached, unreflecting, and unapologetic main character named Meursault.

*Notes from Underground* (1864), a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Narrated by a bitter, anonymous bureaucrat, this short novel is a collection of disjointed and often contradictory notes that decry the central character's alienation from his fellow man.

*Diary of a Madman* (1835), a short story by Nikolai Gogol. Considered one of his greatest works, and written from the first-person perspective of a diarist slowly slipping into love-induced insanity, Gogol plays with perceptions of reality and trustworthiness.

*Psycho* (1960), a film directed by Alfred Hitchcock. This groundbreaking work utilizes two unreliable narrators, first introducing a female "lead" who is quickly killed off, then misleading the audience as to the relationship between Norman Bates and his mother.

**Influencing a Generation of Postmodernists** Nabokov's powerful writing impacted his contemporaries, such as John Banville, Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, and Edmund White, as well as generations of authors after him. Other prominent authors that acknowledge Nabokov's influence include Martin Amis, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon, Pulitzer Prize winner Jeffrey Eugenides, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Jhumpa Lahiri, Marisha Pessl, and Zadie Smith.

### Works in Critical Context

Nabokov earned a secure reputation as one of the twentieth century's most inventive writers. His prose was lauded as both complex and playful, and his descriptive power was unparalleled. While many of his novels might be regarded as masterpieces, it is the blockbuster *Lolita* for which he is most remembered.

**Lolita** The initial reviews of *Lolita* were varied. While several critics expressed shock and distaste, most believed the "pornography" charges were erroneous. Praising Nabokov's lively style, dry wit, and deft characterizations, many reviewers concurred with novelist and literary critic

Granville Hicks, who called the novel "a brilliant *tour de force*." Beat novelist Jack Kerouac described *Lolita* as "a classic old love story," and Charles Rolo commented in his September 1958 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "*Lolita* seems to me an assertion of the power of the comic spirit to wrest delight and truth from the most outlandish materials. It is one of the funniest serious novels I have ever read; and the vision of its abominable hero, who never deludes or excuses himself, brings into grotesque relief the cant, the vulgarity, and the hypocritical conventions that pervade the human comedy."

### Responses to Literature

1. Research the history of the Russian emigrant community in Berlin in the 1920s through the 1940s. What part did Nabokov play in the larger community? Why did he leave Germany after the Nazis came to power, and what happened to those who chose not to leave?
2. At one point in *Lolita*, Humbert admits that he never found out the laws governing his relationship with Lolita. Investigate what rights Humbert had as a stepfather in 1955 and what the penalties for incest were. Investigate the effects of incest on children and compare your findings to the effects Lolita's relationship with Humbert had on her.
3. Analyze Nabokov's use of names in *Lolita*, such as how names are used in the book's word games. How does the comical name of Humbert Humbert influence the reader's opinion of his criminal acts? How are names used to reinforce the recurring theme of coincidence?
4. Compare Nabokov's treatment of taboo-shattering sexual relationships in *Lolita* and *Ada or Ardor*. Is there an implied moral judgment in either work? How are the relationships treated differently? How are they similar?

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## ■ V. S. Naipaul

BORN: 1932, Chaguanas, Trinidad

NATIONALITY: British, Trinidadian

GENRE: Novels, essays, short stories

MAJOR WORKS:

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961)

*Guerrillas* (1975)

*A Bend in the River* (1979)

*The Enigma of Arrival* (1987)

*A Way in the World* (1994)

### Overview

V. S. Naipaul, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, is one of the world's most accomplished authors. His work centers on the Third World, including countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and the Caribbean. He has spent much of his life traveling, and his work usually expresses the viewpoint of a rootless, stateless wanderer who observes his surroundings as an outsider. His detached stance and bleak, skeptical outlook have made Naipaul's work controversial, but his lucid style, skillful use of dialect, and perceptive eye are highly praised.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**The Roots of Rootlessness** Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born August 17, 1932, on the island of Trinidad. His grandfather had come to the West Indies as an indentured servant, as many Indians did between 1880 and the 1930s, to work on sugar, tea, and rubber planta-



V. S. Naipaul *Naipaul, V. S., photograph.* AP Images.

tions. His father was an aspiring journalist who never gained the respect of his wife's family, a prominent clan in the island's high society. Naipaul later fictionalized this situation in his breakthrough novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Early in life, Naipaul experienced a profound alienation, both from his close-knit family life and from the social and political life of Trinidad. He attended one of the island's best high schools and won a scholarship to attend Oxford University (University College) in 1950. England, more than Trinidad, became his home beginning in the 1950s, and in 1955 he married a political-science student, Patricia Hale. Nevertheless, studying English literature at Oxford was not the most suitable preparation for the literary career he was already planning. Naipaul worked as a broadcaster for the BBC during the late 1950s, but soon gave up this position to write full-time.

These youthful experiences set the terms for his entire literary career. Saddened by Trinidad's material and cultural poverty, distanced from his ancestral India, and unable to relate to the heritage of his adopted home—both country's former imperial ruler, England—Naipaul recognized that he was "content to be a colonial,

without a past, without ancestors.” Most of his work deals with people who, like himself, feel estranged from their society and who desperately seek ways to belong. By the same token, many of Naipaul’s stories are set in Third World countries creating new national identities from the remnants of native and colonial cultures.

**Emerging from Trinidad, in Fiction** In the late 1950s, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, once colonies of the British Empire, began the process of becoming an independent nation. In his first four novels, culminating in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), Naipaul drew on his Trinidadian background and current events for subject matter. The first three are short, gently satirical novels, emphasizing cultural misunderstandings and various ironies resulting from an illiterate society’s shift from colonial to independent status.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* marks a turning point for Naipaul. Set also in Trinidad, it echoes in some passages the light tone of the earlier pieces, but far surpasses them through the detailed, compassionate character study of Biswas, the ambitious writer of Hindu extraction, defeated in the struggle for a place of his own, the fictional representative of the author’s own father. Many critics regard *A House for Mr. Biswas* as Naipaul’s first masterpiece. In 1998, The Modern Library listed the work among the finest one hundred novels written in English.

**A Global Canvas** After the success of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul increasingly sought broader geographic and social contexts in which to explore his themes of drift and dislocation. He began to travel extensively, using London as a permanent return base. He wrote prolifically, alternating between journalism and autobiographical fiction, always from the persona of an alienated ex-colonial. His earlier lighthearted tone faded as he examined the more tragic consequences of rootless alienation through the eyes of various “universal wanderers.”

*The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French, and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America* (1962) was Naipaul’s first work in the journalism/travel genre for which he became famous. Naipaul is unsparing in his view of the Caribbean as blighted by the legacy of slavery and imperialism—indeed as a region with no real past or useful tradition to draw upon. *An Area of Darkness* (1964) describes Naipaul’s travels to India. His harsh portrayal of this country shocked many readers; some critics accused him of arriving in India with a rigid bias in favor of Western tradition and ideology. (His second book on the subcontinent, *India: A Wounded Civilization* [1977], generated similar criticism.) With *The Loss Of El Dorado* (1969), a critical history of Trinidad since the Spanish conquest, Naipaul was widely hailed as an explainer of the Third World to the First.

Naipaul’s next novel, *In a Free State* (1971), was his first nontraditional work, consisting of five stories set in

an unnamed developing country in sub-Saharan Africa. The work’s conception and execution won rich praise, but its author’s tragic outlook struck some readers as unduly bitter and pessimistic.

**Portraits of Civil and Moral Disorder** *Guerrillas* (1975), Naipaul’s most sexually explicit novel, takes place on a Caribbean island recently liberated from colonial rule. Naipaul returned to an African setting four years later with his most acclaimed novel, *A Bend in the River*. In a setting of a small village, the writer further explores all of his important themes: the social and moral disorder left in the wake of imperialism; the problems of underdeveloped Third World nations caught between old tribal ways and the new technology of dangerous weaponry and flashy consumer goods; and the liberal white woman in the Third World landscape, a catalyst for volatile sexual and political emotions. Although Naipaul does not name the postcolonial state in which he lays his story, readers familiar with current events could recognize it as Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), during the early days of Mobutu Sese Seko’s brutal regime in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

*A Bend in the River*, like *In a Free State* and *Guerrillas*, contains elements of sexual and political violence within an atmosphere of impending chaos, causing some reviewers to conclude that Naipaul views Third World societies as essentially hopeless. The controversy surrounding his work intensified with the publication of *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1982), in which he examines the Islamic revival in Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Naipaul presents a scathing picture of the civil and social disorder in these countries and attributes this to the dominance of Islamic fanaticism. In the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the lengthy Iranian hostage crisis in 1980 (in which radical students stormed the American embassy in Tehran, seized American hostages, and held them for more than a year), some Americans antagonistic to radical Islam responded favorably to this argument. Others perceived Naipaul’s analysis as shallow, too negative, or even biased.

**Fact and Fiction, Outer and Inner Landscapes** Naipaul’s next novel is also considered a masterpiece by many, although a highly unconventional one. *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections* (1987) is a work of fiction, although the narrator writes autobiographically and much of the material is indistinguishable from Naipaul’s own life; for example, the novel explicitly mentions the death of Naipaul’s sister. Most of this book is set in the countryside of southern England around Salisbury. *The Enigma of Arrival* was Naipaul’s first book to sell well in England. Part of this success was attributable to his depiction of a specifically English landscape and of the rural working-class characters that populate it.

*A Way in the World: A Sequence* (1994) combines memoir, historical scholarship, and imaginative writing in a series of nine narratives of people whose lives have been

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Naipaul's celebrated novels *In a Free State* and *A Bend in the River* concern political turmoil in postcolonial Africa and the havoc caused by clashing cultures, European and African, tribal and modern. The following works of literature, all set in Africa, set in narrative motion a related set of forces:

*Heart of Darkness* (1899), a novel by Joseph Conrad. A major inspiration for Naipaul, this tale concerns an ambitious European who has fallen prey to delusions of grandeur in the Congo and the man who is sent to retrieve him.

*The Sheltering Sky* (1949), a novel by Paul Bowles. A married couple from New York travels into the North African desert, ignorant of the dangers surrounding them.

*Things Fall Apart* (1959), a novel by Chinua Achebe. The most celebrated African novel in English, this tale concerns British disruption of village life in Nigeria.

*The Constant Gardener* (2001), a novel by John Le Carré. A British diplomat, investigating his wife's murder in a remote region of Africa, discovers the corporate conspiracy that led to her death and which may doom him as well.

*The Pick-Up* (2002), a novel by Nadine Gordimer. This tale treats the issue of loving across the divides of class, race, religion, and immigrant status.

review for the *Nation*, notes that "while the book might be said to be deficient in the conventional tensions of fiction," it is nonetheless "a book of wonderful authority and wisdom."

### Responses to Literature

1. Discuss the depiction of women, and in particular Caucasian women, in the novels of V. S. Naipaul. Do these views conflict with or conform to the general view of women in North American society today?
2. Research the history of the immigrant community on the island of Trinidad, the social milieu in which Naipaul sets his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Why do you think Naipaul grew disenchanted with his home at such an early age? Did this disenchantment remain a constant theme in his writings? Provide several examples.
3. How exactly is *The Enigma of Arrival* a work of fiction, and how exactly is it a memoir? Write an essay on the ways that Naipaul subverts, or transcends, the expectations of both genres in this book. You may want to look at *A Way in the World* as well.

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### R. K. Narayan

BORN: 1906, Madras, India

DIED: 2001, Madras, India

NATIONALITY: Indian

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Malgudi Days and Other Stories* (1941)

*The Financial Expert* (1952)

*The Guide* (1958)

*The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961)

*Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (1985)

### Overview

When R. K. Narayan died at the age of ninety-four, he left behind a body of work that will continue to impress generations of readers. He published novels, short stories,



R.K. Narayan Narayan, R.K., photograph. The Library of Congress.

travel books, essays, and retellings of Indian epics, as well as articles he produced as a journalist in his early years. From the 1930s to the early 1990s, he managed to write at least three books every decade. Most of Narayan's prose centers around the fictional village of Malgudi, which Narayan used as a microcosm for studying the interaction between various classes and races of Indian society.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Hardships in Colonial India** Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan was born on October 10, 1906, in his grandfather's home in Madras, the son of schoolteacher R. V. Krishnaswami Iyer and Gnana Iyer. Narayan spent the early years of his life in Madras in the care of his grandmother and a maternal uncle, joining his parents mainly during vacations. At the time, India was still the "jewel in the crown" of the British empire, a colony held since 1857. In the early years of the twentieth century, however, Indian nationalism intensified to

the point that by 1919 the Government of India Act was passed giving India limited self government.

Narayan first went to school in Madras. In 1922 he was shifted to the school in Mysore where his father was the headmaster. *My Days* indicates that Narayan was an indifferent student but an avid reader. He failed the school entrance examination twice and also was unable to get through college easily. Eventually he did graduate from Maharaja College of Mysore with a bachelor of arts degree in 1930.

**Serious Aspirations** Narayan began to write seriously in the 1920s. His biographers Susan Ram and N. Ram describe his intense desire to see his name in print and the hard work he did to accomplish this, not only reading major English writers and periodicals but also going through books on how to sell one's manuscripts. He grew accustomed to receiving rejection slips from publishers and editors, but he continued to harbor hopes of making a living as a writer, until his father persuaded him to take up a teaching position in a school. The experience proved distasteful, and he soon returned to submitting his manuscripts. He eventually succeeded in getting an article on Indian cinema published in the *MADRAS MAIL* in July 1930. The 1920s in India were also marked by the nonviolent protest campaigns of Mohandas Gandhi, whose actions were aimed at forcing Britain to relinquish control of India.

**First Love, First Publication** In his memoir, Narayan recalls wandering the streets of Mysore one day when Malgudi, the setting of most of his fiction, just seemed to "hurl" into his mind, along with a vision of a character called Swaminathan. He thus began his first Malgudi novel, *Swami and Friends*, completing it two years later in 1932.

In publishing short pieces in the *Indian Review* and *Punch*, Narayan satisfied his dream of writing and seeing his name in print. Also during this time, he fell in love. He had spotted fifteen-year-old Rajam Iyer as she was waiting for water at a local street tap. He persuaded his father to send a proposal of marriage to her father. He married Rajam on July 1, 1934. Around this time, he also became the Mysore reporter of a newspaper called the *Justice*.

**Malgudi Is Put on the Map** Narayan knew that for an Indian writing English fiction, *Swami and Friends* would not find a publisher in his country, and publishers in England were not responding. Sometime in 1934 he contacted his friend Krishna Raghavendra Putra, who soon persuaded the famous English novelist Graham Greene, who was already attempting to get some of Narayan's short stories published in English magazines, to look at *Swami and Friends*. Greene was so impressed that he recommended the book. It appeared in October 1935, and Malgudi was launched. Though sales were weak, public and critical response was positive. The year 1935 also

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Narayan's famous contemporaries include:

**Rachel Carson** (1907–1964): Marine biologist, environmentalist, and naturalist and science writer, her work *Silent Spring* (1962) was instrumental in the advent of global environmentalism.

**Hiroshi Inagaki** (1905–1980): Japanese filmmaker who is best known for his *Samurai* trilogy.

**Frida Kahlo** (1907–1954): Mexican painter who became an influential figure with her distinctive style and representation of indigenous culture.

**Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980): French philosopher, writer, and critic who is often attributed with pioneering modern existentialism.

saw the passage of another Government of India Act that moved the country one step closer to true independence.

**Stalled Writing Efforts** After *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and *The Dark Room* (1938), both of which sold poorly but received better and better reviews, Narayan entered the darkest period of his life: Five years into his marriage, his wife died after a short illness of what was probably typhoid. Overwhelmed with grief, he stopped writing. He finally managed to get out of his depression at the same time as the outbreak of World War II. During this time, however, Greene became inaccessible due to his involvement in the war effort, and Narayan found paths to publishing doubly difficult.

**Malgudi Lives On** Narayan managed to sustain himself in this difficult period through his journalism and by giving talks on Madras radio. He became the editor of a journal called *Indian Thought* in 1941, and by 1944 he had managed to complete his fourth novel, *The English Teacher* (1945). It was widely praised and sold well in England. In 1947, Britain ceded control of India by signing the Indian Independence Act, which simultaneously created the Muslim-majority nation of Pakistan.

The author's work returned to Malgudi in *Mr. Sam-path* (1949), and the fictional but no less realistic land continued in *The Financial Expert* (1952), arguably one of Narayan's best and most popular novels. Narayan followed that work with his most political novel, *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), and repeated the success with *The Guide* (1958). Narayan followed *The Guide* with another triumph: *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961). After two less popular works, Narayan's twelfth novel, *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983), made yet another impression—with a tiger as the protagonist. *A Tiger for Malgudi* was the last of Narayan's novels to receive wide critical attention, but it

got mixed reviews, and a few critics noted their disappointment with it.

**Final Work Efforts** At eighty years old, Narayan published *Talkative Man* in 1986, and followed it with his last novel, *The World of Nagaraj* (1990), four years after. He received a number of major awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award for *The Guide*, the Padma Bhushan, and several honorary degrees up until 2001, the year he died.

### Works in Literary Context

**Influences** In *My Days: A Memoir* (1974), the novelist says that his grandmother was a major influence on his life and his storytelling. His maternal uncle, who published a literary journal in Tamil, also played a part in the growth of the novelist's mind in his early years. Narayan is most noted for his creation of Malgudi, a fictitious village set in southern India that most critics consider a composite of his birthplace of Madras and his adult residence of Mysore. These narratives derive from India's oral and literary traditions.

**Economical Style** Among Narayan's strengths as a novelist are the economy of his storytelling and the skill with which he manipulates his plot so that events that complicate the lives of his central characters are resolved within a few hundred pages. Narayan is also a master of shorter forms of fiction—his five collections of short stories, such as *Malgudi Days* (1943), cover the same territory as the novels. The stories of the early collections are slight pieces and usually journalistic in style. Some are anecdotal or no more than character sketches. The stories of the later collections are longer and more intricately built. A few of the stories are satirical in tone and sometimes slip into the absurd.

**Sympathetic Humor in Themes of Struggle** Narayan's stories usually show people as fallible, eccentric, and often amusing. Narayan often uses wry, sympathetic humor to examine the universalized conflicts of Malgudi, focusing on ordinary characters who seek self-awareness through their struggles with ethical dilemmas. All of Narayan's characters, in accordance with principles of Hinduism, retain a calm, dignified acceptance of fate. In his early fiction, Narayan makes use of personal experience to address conflicts between Indian and Western culture. *Swami and Friends: A Novel of Malgudi* (1935), for instance, chronicles an extroverted schoolboy's rebellion against his missionary upbringing. Such novels, like Narayan's later works, were noted for his natural and unaffected language, his subtle humor, and his ability to transform a particular lifestyle into a universal human experience.

### Works in Critical Context

Peers as well as successors have been quick to acknowledge Narayan's contribution to Indian writing in English.

In an essay written at Narayan's death, for instance, the distinguished Indian poet Dom Moraes called Narayan "by far the best writer of English fiction that his country has ever produced." Typical of the praise heaped on the novels and their writer are comments such as those made about *The Financial Expert* and *The Guide*.

***The Financial Expert* (1952)** *The Financial Expert* shows Narayan's powerful handling of the central theme of the vanity of human wishes and his deft manipulation of plot. The portrait of the central character, Margayya, reveals a man who is deeply flawed but also capable of retaining the reader's sympathy. The novel is memorable, too, for the portraits of Dr. Pal, the archetypal confidence man; Meenakshi, Margayya's long-suffering wife; and Balu, his prodigal son.

Margayya's rise and fall take place against a backdrop of a world full of poverty, corruption, bureaucracy, and the opportunism displayed by cynical businessmen and officials in wartime India. Narayan manages to be serious and comic throughout the novel; he also alternates details of everyday life in Malgudi with moments where readers view the workings of Margayya's mind. The critic William Walsh writes that the novel "has an intricate and silken organization, a scheme of composition holding everything together in a vibrant and balanced union."

***The Guide* (1958)** *The Guide* is usually considered Narayan's most accomplished novel. In this work, a former convict named Raju is mistaken for a holy man upon his arrival in Malgudi. Implored by the villagers to avert a famine, Raju is unable to convince them that he is a fraud. Deciding to embrace the role the townspeople have thrust upon him, Raju dies during a prolonged fast and is revered as a saint.

In a 1958 issue of the *New Yorker*, critic Anthony West praised *The Guide* as "the best of R. K. Narayan's enchanting novels about the South Indian town of Malgudi and its people.... It is a profound statement of Indian realities." The Malgudi novels as a whole are most often highly regarded. Critics often compare Narayan's creation of Malgudi to William Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County, and most agree with Charles R. Larson's assessment: "While Faulkner's vision remains essentially grotesque, Narayan's has been predominantly comic, reflecting with humor the struggle of the individual to find peace within the framework of public life."

## Responses to Literature

1. Narayan books often feature Hindu cultural practices. Using your library and the Internet, research the modern Hindu practices in India and write a paper summarizing your findings.
2. Narayan lived and wrote during a time of great change in India, as control of the government passed gradually from the British to the Indians themselves. To find out more about Britain's long involvement in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who focused on the tragedy of human fallibility:

*The Infernal Machine* (1936), a play by Jean Cocteau. In this play, the playwright turns the classic story of Oedipus into a tragic-comedy by using irony where there originally was none.

"A Rose for Emily" (1930), a short story by William Faulkner. In this short story, Emily Grierson is alienated from her immediate society and is isolated in her aging, eccentric, and "spinster" years.

*Snow* (2005), a novel by Orhan Pamuk. In this work, a clash of ideals is witnessed by a poet in exile as he comes to terms with his alienation from poetry and God.

*A View from the Bridge* (1955), a play by Arthur Miller. Italian American longshoreman Eddie Carbone suffers the profound betrayals and conflicts of family and friends in this play.

India, read *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (2000), a historical work by Lawrence James.

3. Chronologically, Narayan's fiction takes up the major events of Indian history. Read one of his novels, then research and write a paper describing the historical context of the action in the novel.

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## Irène Némirovsky

BORN: 1903, Kiev, Ukraine  
DIED: 1942, Auschwitz, Poland  
NATIONALITY: Ukrainian  
GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction  
MAJOR WORKS:  
*The Misunderstanding* (1926)  
*David Golder* (1929)  
*De Bal* (1930)  
*The Wine of Solitude* (1935)  
*Suite Française* (2004)

### Overview

Irène Némirovsky was a prolific Ukrainian novelist and biographer. Best known for her unfinished *Suite Française*, a book composed of two novellas about life in France during the Nazi occupation, Némirovsky has been the subject of a wide range of criticism. Present-day scholars are impressed with her eloquence and critics are appalled by her more than implicit anti-Semitism—despite her Jewish origins and the fate of European Jews at the hands of the Nazis.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Russian, French, and Jewish Influences** Irène Némirovsky was born on February 11, 1903, in Kiev, Ukraine. Her father, Leon Némirovsky, was a rich Jewish banker; Irène's mother was not interested in her. The Némirovsky family lived in Saint Petersburg in Russia, where the young Irène was brought up by a French governess. The environment almost made French her native tongue; however, she also spoke Yiddish, Basque, Finnish, Polish, and English.

In 1918, following the start of the Russian Revolution, the Némirovskys moved to Finland. The following year they moved to Paris, France, where the eighteen-year-old attended the Sorbonne and began her writing career. In 1926 Némirovsky met and married Michel Epstein, a banker, and three years later, she had her first child, a daughter named Denise. Elisabeth was born in 1937.



Irène Némirovsky © Albert Harlingue / Roger-Viollet / The Image Works

**Early Novel and Film Success** In 1929 Némirovsky's novel *David Golder* was published. The book drew upon the author's own experiences as the daughter of a Jewish banker. The novel was an early success in Némirovsky's budding career, and in 1930, the book was adapted into a film, featuring Harry Baur as David Golder. The same year also saw her novel *De Bal* become a movie and a play. More success followed, with Némirovsky being hailed as one of France's most talented young authors. She was so successful that she was bringing in an income that surpassed that of her banker husband.

**Jewish Condemnation and Flight from Paris** Némirovsky converted to Catholicism in 1939, a year after she and her husband tried to gain French citizenship. Némirovsky had also been writing for two arguably anti-Semitic magazines. In 1940, after Nazi troops had occupied a large portion of France, Némirovsky's husband was unable to work at the bank and her books could no longer be published due to her Jewish ancestry. Like other Jewish people, she and her husband were forced to wear the yellow Star of David.

Apparently attempting to disclaim any Jewish connections, Némirovsky wrote a letter to Marshal Pétain, who had just become head of Vichy France, a region that remained free from direct German control only through its willing cooperation with Nazi policies. She expressed how "greatly distressed" she was by the "fate" she feared

awaited her and her family, and made efforts to explain that she and Epstein were born in Russia, but their children were born in France and she and her husband had been living in France for twenty years and had tried without success to gain French citizenship.

Her reasoning and petitions went ignored. When the Nazis came to occupy Paris, Némirovsky and her family fled Paris, taking up residence in a village called Issy-l'Évêque. Némirovsky wrote stories based on what she experienced and expressed her apparent shock at the rapid moral decline she saw in France—the French people showing their basest sides under the pressures of Nazi infiltration. Her view of mankind became very bleak, and she wrote the beginnings of a multipart work that she planned to be structured like a symphony. On July 13, 1942, before Némirovsky could complete her work, she was arrested by the Vichy police. In accordance with Nazi German rule, Némirovsky was taken from her family and as a “stateless person of Jewish descent” was transported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, where she died of typhus one month later.

***The Surviving Suite Française Manuscript***  
After her arrest her husband, Michel Epstein, pleaded with the German ambassador for her release, arguing that his wife's family had never practiced Judaism (and there is no indication that they had) and claiming that Némirovsky's writing was most often anti-Semitic. But his pleading was to no avail. Instead, he too was deported to Auschwitz and died three months after Némirovsky. Némirovsky and Epstein's daughters escaped capture and lived on the run. Before fleeing their home, the elder child, Denise, grabbed a small suitcase that had belonged to her mother, containing photographs and what Denise thought was a diary. Denise took this suitcase with her from one hiding place to another, but even after the war had ended, she avoided reading the “diary,” fearing it would bring up painful memories.

When Denise finally did read her mother's writing, she found not a diary but an unfinished novel about the panicked exile from Paris when the Nazis marched in. Published as *Suite Française* (2004), the book drew international acclaim.

## Works in Literary Context

**Anti-Semitism** Critic and scholar Ruth Franklin suggests that Némirovsky found her style early on, becoming “predominantly a novelist of society, somewhat in the vein of Edith Wharton, but with an acerbically satirical tone that negates the possibility of authorial compassion for her characters.” From the start, claims Franklin, Némirovsky’s fiction involved “anti-Jewish stereotypes that would become something of a trademark.” For example, in an early novella entitled *The Misunderstanding* (1926), the critic points out, “an aristocrat consults a Jewish co-worker for financial advice: a ‘typical young Jew, rich,

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Némirovsky’s famous contemporaries include:

**Anne Frank** (1929–1945): Known throughout the world for the posthumously published *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947). Anne and her family went into hiding when the Germans occupied Amsterdam.

**Zora Neale Hurston** (1903–1960): African American writer who paved the way during the Harlem Renaissance for future African American women writers.

**Clare Booth Luce** (1903–1987): American editor, activist, and writer, she was also a high-profile socialite, a congresswoman with a Republican seat in the House of Representatives, and an ambassador to Italy.

**George Orwell** (1903–1950): Celebrated English author and journalist, he concerned himself with government, politics, language, and censorship.

elegant, with a long pointed nose in a narrow, pale face.’ And the Jew takes advantage of his colleague financially.” *David Golder* (1929), which Franklin calls “an appalling book by any standard,” further exploits the Jewish stereotype.

Whether veiled or explicit, anti-Semitism was hardly uncommon in European literature of the early part of the twentieth century. Writers as prominent as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway have all, more or less rightly, been accused by critics of employed Jewish stereotypes in their works. The fact these stereotypes were so pervasive helps explain to some degree why the world was so slow to respond to the threat posed by Adolf Hitler’s anti-Jewish agenda.

## Works in Critical Context

As critic Jonathan Weiss reminds, the same France that denied Némirovsky citizenship “embraced her incredible writings, and the masses compared her work to Proust.” General reception for Némirovsky’s works, however, has been mixed. This is particularly the case for her most well-known work, *Suite Française*:

***Suite Française*** The posthumously published *Suite Française* is regarded by Helen Dunmore of *The Guardian* as “eloquent and glowing with life,” with a “deep understanding of human behavior under pressure and a hard-won, often ironic composure in the face of violation.” Though the book is an unfinished fragment, it could have been a classic had it been completed. Jane Stevenson of *The Observer* notes that the two novellas “are an unrevised response to current events, they have the urgency and immediacy of a diary. Hindsight would

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who have also portrayed the Jewish condition—in either positive or negative ways:

*The Birthday Party* (1958), a play by Harold Pinter. In this realist drama the playwright features an innocuous Webber and a calculating Goldberg who represent the extremes.

*Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel by George Eliot. In this social satire the author explores the search for a national identity and a definition of the self as a Jewish person during Victorian times.

*Maus* (1977), a graphic novel by Art Spiegelman. In this unusual but provocative format for the story of the Holocaust, the Jewish people are portrayed as mice and the Nazis are depicted as cats.

*The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596–1598), a play by William Shakespeare. Though he attempts to retain his dignity as a Jew, the infamous Shylock has gone down in literary history as the stingiest of penny-pinching moneylenders.

*Shylock* (1976), a play by Arnold Wesker. Using the original stories upon which Shakespeare based *Merchant*, the playwright places his loan-banker protagonist in a 1563 Jewish ghetto in Venice.

have brought more art, but something valuable would have been lost."

Ruth Kluger of the *Washington Post* prefers this book over diaries of this era and memoirs published after the event. She claims that *Suite Française* is "the perfect mixture: a gifted novelist's account of a foreign occupation, written while it was taking place, with history and imagination jointly evoking a bitter time, correcting and enriching our memory."

In *Suite Française*, Némirovsky does not write about the condition of Jews in a Nazi-occupied France. Instead, her stories highlight the relationships between the French and the Germans as the Germans begin to invade their homeland. Critics have been impressed with the fact that Némirovsky found it possible to show the German soldiers in a sympathetic light. Most noted is her compassion and her balanced viewpoint against those who have sent her to the concentration camp. Némirovsky's presentation of the German soldiers contrasted the popular anti-German sentiments during the time that she was writing the novel.

### Responses to Literature

1. Do you think Némirovsky's book *Suite Française* would have been well received if people did not

know about her own tragic end? Is the novel more relevant due to her personal tragedy? Explain your response in a short essay.

2. Visit the Museum of Jewish Heritage online. Investigate the artifacts, art, and diary entries found on the second floor, which features the Holocaust Memorial material. Choose a poem that has relevance to you. Share the poem with a group and discuss its significance.
3. *David Golder* is the story about a villainous Polish Jew. Do you think Némirovsky wrote the book to stereotype Jews, or does the book have a more universal message? Discuss your opinion with the class, using excerpts from *David Golder* to support your view.

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## Pablo Neruda

BORN: 1904, Parral, Chile

DIED: 1973, Santiago, Chile

NATIONALITY: Chilean

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair* (1924)

*Residence on Earth* (1933)

*General Song* (1950)

*Black Island Memorial* (1964)

### Overview

Arguably the most widely read Latin American poet of all time, Pablo Neruda was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971. This honor came as the culmination of more than fifty years of writing poetry popular with readers the world over. In the Nobel citation, the Swedish Academy praises Neruda “for a poetry that with the action of an elemental force brings alive a continent’s destiny and dreams.” Both his lyrical voice and his committed, collective voice bespeak the passion and insightful observation that characterized his life and his works.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

The poet known as Pablo Neruda was named Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto at his birth in 1904. He signed his work “Pablo Neruda” (although he did not legally adopt that name until 1946) because his father, a railroad worker, disapproved of his son’s poetic interests.

**Literary Success at a Young Age** Neruda grew up in southern Chile and in 1921 moved to Santiago and enrolled in college with the intention of preparing himself for a career as an instructor of French. He left college soon after, however, to devote more time to poetry, which had already become his central interest. His first book, *Twilight Book (Crepusculario)*, was published in 1923, and the following year he published *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair (Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada)*, a book of intensely romantic and erotic poems. This became his most popular work, more than a million and a half copies of which were published in Spanish alone before his death.

**Surrealist Poems and Work as a Chilean Diplomat** In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he completed the first two volumes of *Residence on Earth (Residencia en la tierra*, 1933, 1935), universally considered the finest surrealist poetry in Spanish. He claimed, however,



Pablo Neruda Chilean poet and activist Pablo Neruda, photograph. Sam Falk / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Neruda's famous contemporaries include:

**Salvador Allende** (1908–1973): The first democratically elected Marxist leader in Latin America, Allende instituted a massive Socialist overhaul of Chile upon his election, which included nationalizing industry—especially the lucrative, American-owned copper mines. His term was marked by interest from both the KGB, which supported his reforms, and the CIA, which actively attempted to depose him. The Nixon administration's reaction to his reforms caused a crippling downturn in the economy, and he died suspiciously during a right-wing coup financed by the CIA.

**Augusto Pinochet** (1915–2006): In the wake of Allende's death, General Pinochet set up a military dictatorship that was as far right and politically savage as Allende's government had been far left and democratic. Where Allende had attempted to work with his opponents, Pinochet simply had them arrested without a trial, tortured, and killed—as many as three thousand individuals were "disappeared," and never heard from again.

**Federico García Lorca** (1898–1936): A Spanish poet and dramatist. Lorca and Neruda established a friendship while the latter was stationed in Barcelona. Lorca was killed during the Spanish Civil War by right-wing Nationalist guerrillas.

**Cesar Vallejo** (1892–1938): A Peruvian poet and another friend of Neruda from his time in Spain. His three books of poetry were each considered revolutionary in their own ways, anticipating much of later avant-garde poetry.

that when he wrote these works he knew nothing of surrealism; he had simply responded to the same currents in the air that led to the formation of the surrealist movement elsewhere. In 1930 he married for the first time, but the marriage was unhappy, and a few years later he left his wife to live with Delia del Carril, with whom he stayed until 1955. Between 1927 and 1935, Neruda was a Chilean diplomat in, successively, Burma, Ceylon, Java, Singapore, Argentina, and Spain.

**The Spanish Civil War and Neruda's Communism**  
Neruda was the Chilean consul in Madrid, Spain, in the mid-1930s, a time of great political turmoil that led to the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. The forces of ultranationalist general Francisco Franco were triumphant, and he installed himself as the country's dictator. Neruda's horror at the civil and military barbarities (including the assassination of his friend, poet Federico García Lorca), which accompanied Franco's war against the Spanish Republic, transformed him into a deeply committed politi-

cal poet and led to his eventual membership in the Communist Party. Neruda's political awakening is clear in *Spain in My Heart*, his volume of verse published during this time. After the war, Neruda was in charge of helping 2,000 Republican refugees in France find asylum in Chile.

Neruda's new commitment to communism is clear in the third volume of *Residence on Earth* (1947) and his subsequent poetry, particularly *General Song* (*Canto general*, 1950). In place of the introspection and surrealist complexities of the first two volumes of *Residence*, he produced a poetry that is open and direct, written not for academics and other sophisticated readers of poetry but rather, as Neruda repeatedly emphasized, workers and the politically oppressed. Neruda was openly supportive of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin for many years, until it became clear he had been a ruthless, murderous dictator. Though Neruda disavowed his earlier praise of Stalin, he remained committed to the pure principles of communism.

**On the Run from the Government** Neruda was elected to the Chilean senate as a representative of the Communist Party in 1945. Following a dramatic public falling-out between Neruda and Chilean president Gabriel Gonzalez Videla, Neruda was forced to go into hiding, first in Chile, then in Argentina. With help from his friends, writer Miguel Asturias and artist Pablo Picasso, Neruda made his way to Europe, and from there he traveled widely. It was during this time he composed *General Song*, a broad catalog of his experiences. The Gonzalez-Videla government crumbled in 1952, and the new administration welcomed Neruda back to his home country. A few years later, Neruda's wife left him, and he was free to marry longtime mistress Matilde Urrutia. He spent most of the rest of his life with her at his homes in Santiago and at Isla Negra on the Chilean coast. Isla Negra provided him with the subject or inspiration for many later poems, including his verse autobiography, *Black Island Memorial* (*Memorial de Isla Negra*, 1964).

**Final Years and Criticism of U.S. Foreign Policy**  
Neruda was a vocal critic of U.S. foreign policy, and he denounced U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the U.S. response to the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962). Unsurprisingly, he was not welcome in the United States, but he did travel to a 1966 literary conference in New York City, thanks to the efforts of American playwright Arthur Miller to persuade the U.S. government to grant the Chilean poet a visa. In 1969 he was nominated by the Chilean Communist Party for president, but he stepped aside in favor of his friend Salvador Allende. When Allende died in a bloody coup led by General Augusto Pinochet four years later, Neruda was very sick from cancer, but that event undoubtedly hastened his own death, which occurred a few days afterward. At his death, he left thirty-four books of poems, essays, and drama in print as well as eight more volumes of poetry and a memoir he had hoped to publish on his seventieth birthday.

## Works in Literary Context

Neruda was an educated, widely traveled person with diverse literary influences. Because his poetry often addresses broad universal themes with a personal, confessional tone, his work is likened to that of American poet Walt Whitman. The poems of Neruda that paint a bleaker picture of modern society have prompted comparisons to T.S. Eliot, particularly *The Waste Land* (1922). Though Neruda is often grouped with surrealist poets of the 1920s and 1930s, he pointed out that he had no firsthand knowledge of them, and came to his own surrealist tendencies individually.

*La Canción de la fiesta* (1921), Neruda's first volume of verse, reflects the influence of the symbolists and of Walt Whitman and Ruben Dario in its quiet, confessional tone. The poems in this collection address such themes as love and death in a traditional style. A similar blend of romantic and symbolist influences characterizes his second volume, *Twilight Book* (1923), which Neruda later dismissed as unsophisticated, although it is often considered a classic of Chilean poetry. Neruda's next major volume, *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, is considered to mark his transition from symbolist to surrealist poetry. A best seller, this volume is apparently chaotic and arbitrary in its enumeration of material objects and complex evocation of thought and sensation. The book features poems that convey personal emotion in mystical natural terms. Although these verses initially shocked critics with their everyday language and lyrical yet explicit treatment of the joys and failures of love and sex, Neruda later asserted in his famous essay "Sobre una poesía sin pureza" ("On a Poetry without Purity") that poetry should be "corroded as if by an acid, by the toil of the hand, impregnated with sweat and smoke, smelling of urine and lilies."

In such works of political verse as *Poesía política* (1953) and *Las uvas y el viento* (1954), Neruda employs a new, simpler style to communicate more directly with the common people, a goal that had eluded him despite the popular and political thrust of his earlier poetry.

Most critics agree that *Extravagaria* (*Estravagario*, 1958) signals the last major development in Neruda's poetry. Like the *Elemental Odes*, the poems in this volume are characterized by a flippant, self-indulgent tone and lucid style. Returning to the egocentrism of his earliest verse, Neruda employs self-parody to gently satirize his previous works and persona, particularly mocking his early stance of the poet as hero. His later poetry includes didactic political poetry, light, frivolous verse, and serious, prophetic works, often combining elements from all three styles.

## Works in Critical Context

Geoffrey Barracough called Neruda "a one-man Renaissance . . . who has modified the outlook of three generations of Latin Americans. His roots are firmly planted in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) had a profound effect of Neruda's work, politics, and personal life. Other works directly influenced by this war include:

*Homage to Catalonia* (1938), a nonfiction work by George Orwell. In this work, Orwell gives a firsthand account of his experiences during the Spanish Civil War.

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), a novel by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's novel tells the story of an American working with an anti-fascist guerrilla unit during the Spanish Civil War.

*And No Man's Wit* (1940), a novel by Rose Macaulay. Macaulay's book was widely praised but now largely forgotten. Its view of the possibility of heroism and honor during the Spanish Civil War stands in sharp contrast to those expressed in Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), a film directed by Guillermo del Toro. Set in Spain in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, the film is a nightmarish fairy tale set against the backdrop of the repressive regime of Francisco Franco.

Chile . . .; his appeal is to the whole continent." Although translations of his works have existed since the 1940s, Neruda remained relatively unknown to English-speaking readers prior to the translation of several of his works in the early 1960s.

Scholars concur that misinterpretation of the surrealistic images in *Tentativa del hombre infinito* resulted in critical neglect, and the collection is now regarded as one of Neruda's major achievements. While most critics have agreed that Neruda's Marxist view of Chile's history of poverty and tyranny results in a work of uneven quality, *General Song* is often regarded as one of Neruda's major achievements. Fernando Alegria called Neruda's *Elemental Odes* "a song to matter, to its dynamism and to the life and death cycles which perpetuate it."

## Responses to Literature

1. Take a walk in a natural setting: the woods, the beach, a park. Write a poem about what you see. Does your mood in any way affect your descriptions?
2. Compare and contrast the statements on despair in W.H. Auden's "Funeral Blues" and Neruda's "Song of Despair." How does the style in each reflect the theme?
3. After reading *General Song*, discuss the influence of Neruda's pro-Communist stance on his poetry. In what ways do the poems suggest an intended

- audience of working-class rather than academic or bourgeois readers?
4. Discuss how Neruda's travels and friendships with world artists broadened the scope of his subject matter.

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## Edith Nesbit

BORN: 1858, Kennington, England

DIED: 1924, New Romney, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Grim Tales* (1893)

*The Story of the Treasure Seekers, Being the Adventures of the Bastable Children in Search of a Fortune* (1899)

*The Wouldbegoods, Being the Further Adventures of the Treasure Seekers* (1901)

*Five Children and It* (1902)

*Oswald Bastable and Others* (1905)

*The Railway Children* (1906)

### Overview

Edith Nesbit, one of the most prolific writers of fantasy both for children and adults, is best known for two series of children's stories, the Bastable books and her "magic" series, which were praised in her own time by Rudyard Kipling and H. G. Wells. Her stories distinguish them-



Edith Nesbit © Mary Evans Picture Library / The Image Works

selves from many of the children's fantasies produced in the nineteenth century in their focus on children as members of families, in contrast to the solitary adventures of Lewis Carroll's Alice or the various heroines and heroes of George MacDonald's stories.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Longing for Stability** Nesbit was the youngest of the six children of John Collis Nesbit and Sarah Green Nesbit. Her father, who single-handedly administered an agricultural college—the first of its kind, founded by his father—died when Nesbit was three years old. Although she could not have had many memories of her father, the return of the absent father becomes a poignant moment in many of her fantasies. Her mother—indulgent toward all her children—took over her husband's work for a time. Failing finances and the onset of tuberculosis in her oldest child, Mary, occasioned a series of moves, both in England and continental Europe. Consequently, Nesbit's concern with stability of place and her nostalgia for the scenes of childhood play and relative calm were to remain intense throughout her life.

Nesbit published "My School-Days" in a series of articles for *The Girl's Own Paper* during 1896–1897; many of these memories—adventures with her much-loved elder

brothers, Henry and Alfred—were to be transformed into the escapades of her fictional children.

Nesbit was born and raised in a time known as the Victorian era, during which Queen Victoria ruled England and its territories. Queen Victoria sat on the throne longer than any other British monarch, from 1837 until 1901. This period saw significant changes for both Britain and Europe as a whole, with industrialization leading much of the population to jobs in urban factories instead of on farms, as in the past. The era was also marked by a preoccupation with the rules of proper behavior in society and a celebration of the innocence of childhood. This was reflected in the many popular periodicals of the time that focused on home and family life, such as the ones in which Nesbit's work was published.

**Early Writings and Marriage** In 1880, Nesbit married Hubert Bland. Shortly after their marriage Bland contracted smallpox, and during his illness his business partner abandoned him, taking their joint capital. Nesbit, with her first child as well as her husband to support, wrote verses and painted pictures for greeting cards. She began writing short stories as well. The first of these was accepted by Alice Hoatson, a manuscript reader for a minor publication, *Sylvia's Home Journal*. Hoatson later gave up her job and lived with the Blands, giving Nesbit needed assistance with her writing and with household tasks.

Nesbit's first published novel, *The Prophet's Mantle* (1885), was written in collaboration with her husband under the pseudonym Fabian Bland; it was not well received. After Bland's recovery, he began a successful journalistic career in which Nesbit also collaborated. However, it was Nesbit's steady and increasing production of verse and short narratives that supported their growing family, which eventually included the two children of Bland and Alice Hoatson. This was not Bland's first infidelity; he had maintained a mistress during his courtship of Nesbit and continued to have affairs throughout his life. Nesbit's reaction to the revelation of the paternity of Hoatson's children was complex, yet she acquiesced at Bland's insistence that Hoatson remain with them. It is possible that Nesbit realized, although not consciously, that by taking upon herself the household management and a great deal of the child rearing, Hoatson was helping to facilitate Nesbit's increasingly demanding career.

Nesbit and Bland were active members in the Byron and Shelley societies, and they became influential in the newly founded socialist group, the Fabian Society. These activities brought them into contact with many of the leading intellectuals of their time, notably H. G. Wells and George Bernard Shaw.

**An Independent Voice** Nesbit was almost forty before she began to publish fiction outside of serial collections edited by others. Her own first ventures were two collections, *Grim Tales* and *Something Wrong*, both

published in 1893; these books included stories from various serial publications. Both collections received cautiously positive reviews and are the earliest evidence of Nesbit's work as a writer of the fantastic. Between 1894 and 1899, Nesbit published more verse, and continued to produce minor children's books such as *Pussy Tales* and *Doggy Tales* (both 1895), which resembled Beatrix Potter's more famous animal stories, although Nesbit's characteristically astringent tone was already present in parent/child exchanges. These were almost the last such books she produced. She also wrote children's versions of William Shakespeare's plays and a series of historical narratives, *Royal Children in English History* (1897), although her own historical novels would not appear for several years.

**Success with Children's Books** The deep fund of memory tapped first by her Bastable stories, beginning with *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899) and continued in *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) led to success that was instantaneous and lasting. The highest royalties Nesbit ever received were the eleven hundred pounds she earned for *The Wouldbegoods* in its first year. It was not until she was commissioned by the editors of the *Strand Magazine* to write a series of stories, at thirty pounds per episode (as opposed to fifty pounds for a single book), that she began the series of fantastic tales upon which much of her fame as a writer would rest.

These seven stories, collected in *The Book of Dragons* (1899), are Nesbit's playful variations on dragon stories, and they contain almost all of the elements, excepting only time travel, that were to become the hallmarks of Nesbit's fantasies for children. On occasion, Nesbit favored a mathematical or logical solution to the narrative dilemma, and an early case in point is "The Island of the Nine Whirlpools," in which the dragon can be defeated only when all of the whirlpools are stilled. The hero discovers the equation that determines the crucial moment and is able to claim that he has won the princess by "love and mathematics."

**"The Crowded Years"** Nesbit called her next collection of stories *Nine Unlikely Tales for Children* (1901). The title is appropriate since Nesbit exploits the fairy tale for structure while interpolating her own, distinctively improbable, content. These stories may have been, in part, a reaction against the conventionality of the tales she had contributed to other collections. Nesbit departs almost completely from the fairy tale into the fable in "Wherewanttogo; or, the Bouncible Ball," the story of two children who spoil a perfect vacation by bickering and, in a fit of pique, cut open the magical ball that has provided their adventures.

Nesbit's biographer, Julia Briggs, calls the 1900s "the crowded years." because not only was Nesbit completing the Bastable books and writing several minor stories, she was also embarking on a new children's series, her "magic" series, beginning with *Five Children and It*.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Nesbit's famous contemporaries include:

- Lewis Carroll** (1832–1898): Author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and a distinguished Oxford don.
- H. G. Wells** (1866–1946): The author of many science-fiction novels, including *The Time Machine*.
- C. S. Lewis** (1898–1963): A British author and Christian scholar; creator of the famous Narnia series for children.
- P. L. Travers** (1899–1996): An Australian author best known for her *Mary Poppins* series.

This book, again a collection of tales first published in serials, was the beginning of Nesbit's most influential contribution to fantasy literature.

The course of Nesbit's fiction from 1909 until 1923 recapitulates the sequence of her earlier career, as she tried her hand again at Gothic stories for adults.

Nesbit died in New Romney, Kent, England, on May 4, 1924, of heart disease and possibly lung cancer; she was buried in Jesson St. Mary's, Kent. Her daughter Rosamund published a posthumous collection, *The Five of Us—and Madeline* in 1925.

### Works in Literary Context

Nesbit's plots are often motivated by the desire not merely for amusement but for marvels. She introduces her fantastic creatures into the contemporary reality of her characters, whose adventures are inspired by their reading books about Atlantis or Babylon, besieged castles, or the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Finally, she adds the element of time travel; her fantastic voyages are inspired by works of F. Anstey, such as *Tourmalin's Time Cheques* (1891) and *The Brass Bottle* (1900), as much as by H. G. Wells.

**Fantasy and Fairy Tale Conventions** *Oswald Bastable and Others* shows contradictory tendencies in Nesbit's fiction; certain tales seem to look beyond affirming the status quo, while elsewhere in the collection the reader encounters stories that are conventional, if not reactionary. For example, the story "The Ring and the Lamp" presents a twist in the usual genie story because the servants of the two magical objects reject their assigned roles—"No one really likes being in service,"—form a company, and employ the fathers of the two girls who originally summoned them.

Unlike the Bastable stories, which suffer from a lack of real variety in adventures, the "magic" series shows Nesbit at her most consistently inventive. Especially effective is the distinctive character of each magical creature.

The dominant trait of the phoenix in *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), is vanity, which makes careful flattery the children's most effective way of getting wishes granted and which also leads to their final adventure. The phoenix, convinced that a theater to which the children have taken it is one of its own temples, starts a fire that brings the adventures to the brink of disaster. The children are forced to become objectively critical, and the renunciation of magic becomes as inevitable as their invoking it. Yet, Nesbit was a pioneer in the use of time travel in children's fantasies, and her work influenced the writings of C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Edward Eager.

### Works in Critical Context

Modern critics such as Eleanor Cameron and Roger Lancelyn Green attest not only to Nesbit's influence on other writers but also to the number and diversity of testimonials her work has received—for example, it has been highly praised both by Noel Coward and by Gore Vidal. Valuable for its own sake, Nesbit's fantastic fiction has much to offer those who study the craft of fiction either as readers or as creators, as well as those who seek insight into the literary culture of the late nineteenth century.

**Five Children and It** One testimony to children's responses to *Five Children and It* is found in a letter from Rudyard Kipling to Nesbit, dated March 11, 1903. Speaking of his children, aged five and seven, he writes: "Their virgin minds never knew one magazine from another till it dawned upon Elsie that a thing called the *Strand* with a blue cover and a cab was where the *Psammead* tales lived.... I have been sent for *Strands* in the middle of the month, I have had to explain their non-arrival; and I have had to read them when they came. They were a dear delight to the nursery."

In writing for children Nesbit proved her ability to combine humor and sympathy, the personal and the universal. Not only does her popularity in this genre continue today, she also served as a major influence upon other writers for the young, including Edward Eager and C. S. Lewis. Her work, in turn, owes much to Victorian authors, so that in reading Nesbit's productions one gets a glimpse of a much wider range of literature beloved by young and old alike. She thus stands as an important transitional figure, both participating in the final years of an era often referred to as the golden age of children's books and anticipating the children's literature of the later twentieth century.

### Responses to Literature

1. Archetypes are symbols that are more or less universal. Choose a few of Nesbit's stories and make a list of the archetypes you find. Are they used

traditionally, or does Nesbit alter the typical function of these archetypes somehow?

2. Give examples of the feminist ideas found in Nesbit's middle works.
3. C. S. Lewis borrows from Nesbit's work in his Narnia series, particularly *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Magician's Nephew*. Find two instances in these books where Nesbit's influence is obvious (see her *The Island of the Nine Whirlpools* in particular).
4. Using your library or the Internet, find out more about the Fabian Society in London. Write a paper summarizing its history.
5. Look at the way children are portrayed in *Nine Unlikely Tales for Children*. Does Nesbit see children as victims or as instigators? Is that view prevalent in her other books?

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Time travel is a recurrent theme in much of Nesbit's work. In many other works of literature, time travel is used as a plot device and a way to explore different, often fantastical worlds. Here are a few other works in which time travel plays a role:

*The Time Machine* (1895), a novel by H. G. Wells. In this novel, the main character, an inventor, creates a machine with which he travels forward in time to what he at first assumes is a utopian future society.

*Back to the Future* (1985), a film directed by Robert Zemeckis. A teenager travels back in time, meets his parents, and then must ensure that they fall in love so he can be born.

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), a novel by J. K. Rowling. In this third book of the famous series, the title character and his magic friends travel back in time to save themselves from imminent harm.

## Ngugi wa Thiong'o

BORN: 1938, Kamiriithu, Kenya

NATIONALITY: Kenyan

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

*Devil on the Cross* (1980)

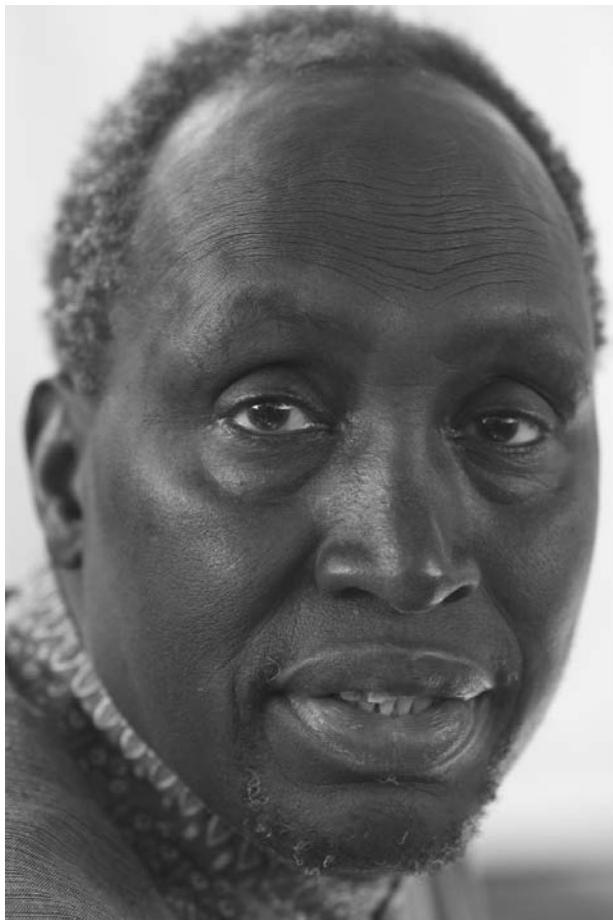
*Wizard of the Crow* (2004–2006)

### Overview

Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a pioneer in the literature of Africa. He published the first English language novel by an East African, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), and wrote the first modern novel in Gikuyu, a Kenyan language, *Devil on the Cross* (1980). Writing in Gikuyu enables him to communicate with the peasants and workers of Kenya.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Political Unrest during Childhood** Born James Thiong'o Ngugi on January 5, 1938, Ngugi wa Thiong'o was the son of Thiong'o wa Nduu and Wanjika wa Ngugi. Ngugi was the fifth child of the third of Thiong'o's four wives. Ngugi grew up in the city of Limuru in Kenya, a British colony at the time, as it had been since the late nineteenth century. Starting in 1952 with a rebellion against the British, a state of emergency was imposed throughout the country. English then became the language of instruction, and Ngugi learned English.



Ngugi wa Thiong'o Geraint Lewis / Writer Pictures / drr.net

The state of emergency arose from the armed revolt of the Land and Freedom Army (called the "Mau Mau") by the British and made up of certain Kenyan tribes against the injustices—particularly the unequal distribution of land—of the colonial system. The revolt was also caused by a growing sense of nationalism and a rejection of European dominance over Kenya. Ngugi's elder brother joined the guerrillas between 1954 and 1956. As a consequence, Ngugi's mother was detained for three months and tortured. On his return home after his first term at school, Ngugi found that, as part of the colonial forces' anti-insurgency "protected" village strategy, his home had simply disappeared. The state of emergency lasted until 1959, and by its end, more than thirteen thousand civilians had been killed, nearly all African.

Ngugi attended Makerere University in Uganda and then the University of Leeds in England, where he was exposed to West Indian-born social theorist Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which Fanon argues that political independence for oppressed peoples must be won—often violently—before genuine social and economic change is able to be achieved. But more influential were works by communism's original theorists, Karl Marx

and Friedrich Engels. By the early 1960s, he was writing for a living as a regular columnist for such Kenyan newspapers as the *Sunday Post*, the *Daily Nation*, and the *Sunday Nation*.

During this time, Kenya had achieved independence from Great Britain. After major Kenyan political parties agreed on a constitution in 1962, Kenya became independent on December 12, 1963. A year later, Kenya became a republic within the Commonwealth of Nations, a group of independent sovereign states many of which had been British colonies or dependencies.

**Published Early Novels** During this time also, Ngugi began writing works that criticized Kenyan society and politics. Ngugi's first novel, *Weep Not, Child*, is the most autobiographical of his fictional works and was written while a student at Makerere. Its four main characters embody the forces unleashed in central Kenya with the 1952 declaration of the state of emergency. The novel, written in English, was the first published English language novel by an East African writer.

In his second novel, *The River Between* (1965), Ngugi examined the relationship between education and political activism, and the relationship between private commitment and public responsibility. *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) followed. The four main characters of this novel reflect upon the Mau Mau rebellion and its consequences as they await "Uhuru Day," or the day of Kenyan independence, achieved in 1963. Where *A Grain of Wheat* breaks most significantly with the earlier novels is in the abandonment of the idea of education as the key to solving Kenya's problems and the acceptance, at least in the abstract, of the need for armed struggle. After writing *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngugi rejected the Christian name of James and began writing under the name Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

In 1968, Ngugi—then an instructor at the University of Nairobi—and several colleagues successfully campaigned to transform the university's English Department into the Department of African Languages and Literature. Ngugi was named chairman of the new department. He became a vocal advocate of African literature written in African languages. Ngugi next accepted a year's visiting professorship in African literature at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, before returning to University College in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1971. Before long, he was acting chairman and then chairman of the department.

**Wrote Significant Plays** While Ngugi had written full-length plays as early as 1962—namely, *The Black Hermit*—he began focusing more attention on them in the mid-1970s. He began translating his play *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) into Gikuyu in 1978, and, with fellow Kenyan playwright Ngugi wa Mirii, wrote another play in Gikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (1977). It was translated into English as *I Will Marry When I Want* in 1982. Ngugi published his last English language novel, *Petals of*

*Blood*, in 1977. That same year, in response to *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, the Kenyan government arrested and detained him for one year.

**Wrote in Gikuyu While Detained** In detention, Ngugi wrote *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (1981). He also began writing his first Gikuyu language novel, *Caitaani mutharaba-ini* (1980) on sheets of toilet paper. Ngugi was never given any reason for his detention. Upon his release, he lost his position at the University of Nairobi. Although he continued to write nonfiction in English after this point, Ngugi wrote his novels and plays in Gikuyu and translated some of his works into other African languages.

Ngugi was occupied for the next two years with the English translation of *Caitaani mutharaba-ini* (*Devil on the Cross*, 1982) and his second collection of essays, *Writers in Politics* (1981). This collection is made up of thirteen essays, written between 1970 and 1980, the main concern of which is summed up by Ngugi in the preface: "What's the relevance of literature to life?"

**Lived in Exile** In 1982, Ngugi left his country for a self-imposed exile. While Kenya had been very politically stable through the decades, the country's National Assembly voted to formally make Kenya a one-party state in 1982. Later that same year, a group of junior air force officers, supported by university students and urban workers, tried and failed to impose a military coup. During his exile, Ngugi lectured at Auckland University in New Zealand, and those lectures were published as *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). This collection condenses many of his earlier arguments on language, literature, and society into four, often informatively autobiographical, essays.

In 1986, Ngugi announced that he would bid a complete "farewell to English." Ngugi then published three children's books in Gikuyu and a booklet, *Writing Against Neocolonialism* (1986), as well as a second novel in Gikuyu, *Matigari ma Njiruungi* (1986; translated as *Matigari* in 1989), which was banned in Kenya for a decade.

Since 1989, Ngugi has lived in the United States, teaching at universities in New York and California. In 2006, he published *Wizard of the Crow*, an English translation of his Gikuyu novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo* (2004), to glowing reviews. It is a political satire with elements of magical realism.

### Works in Literary Context

Ngugi has singled out three works as having impressed and influenced him in particular: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), and Peter Abrahams's *Tell Freedom* (1954). Informally, Ngugi's political thinking was revolutionized by his exposure to works by Karl Marx and Franz Fanon and by socialist academics. Apart from the West Indian writers on whom Ngugi's university research

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Thiong'o's famous contemporaries include:

**Chinua Achebe** (1930–): Nigerian novelist who chose to write in English in order to reclaim the language from its association with the British colonizers of Africa. His novels include *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

**Wangari Muta Maathai** (1940–): Kenyan environmental activist and member of Parliament who, in 2004, became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Gabriel García Márquez** (1927–): Colombian novelist and writer with radical political views and father of the "magical realist" movement in literature. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982. His novels include *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).

**Daniel arap Moi** (1924–): president of Kenya, 1978–2002, and ardent anti-Marxist, he established a single-party state and presided over human rights abuses and a major corruption scandal.

**Gao Xingjian** (1940–): Chinese novelist, playwright, critic, and artist living in France, whose work is banned in China. In 2000, he became the first Chinese writer awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His plays include *Signal Alarm* (1982).

focused, the specific literary influences to which he was first exposed at Leeds were German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's plays and Irish-British novelist Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), described by Ime Ikiddeh as a "major influence" on Ngugi.

**History** Like their counterparts in other postcolonial settings, African writers confront a history that has been written about them by outsiders, a set of defining (often derogative) tropes and stories to which they often feel compelled to respond. They need to "remember" a history that has effectively been dismembered as a result of the violent encounter of colonialism. Thus revisiting Kenyan and Gikuyu history plays a central role in Ngugi's works. His first novels are set in the recent colonial past; the middle novels, while set at the time of independence and after, feature extensive flashbacks as an integral part of their structure. Traditional Gikuyu stories, songs, myths, and customs, along with the stories and songs of the resistance movement before and after independence, are also key elements in this urge to recover an obscured or misrepresented past.

Such an oral tradition can be found in *Devil on the Cross*. In formal terms, the writing of this novel in Gikuyu has resulted in a far heavier reliance on devices drawn from, and deliberately signaling the novel's relationship

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

While imprisoned, Ngugi wrote *Detained*, his memoir of the experience. Here are some other works written about or during the time their authors were in jail.

*Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524), a philosophical treatise by Boethius. Jailed for treason and awaiting trial, the Roman Christian philosopher examines such issues as whether humans have free will and how evil can exist. This work uses classical philosophy to answer its questions and was very influential in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

*Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), an autobiography by Nelson Mandela. Much of this book was secretly written during the twenty-seven years Mandela was imprisoned in South Africa for working against the apartheid regime, which segregated and oppressed nonwhite people. Mandela later became the first elected president of South Africa and received the Nobel Peace Prize.

*Night* (1958), a memoir by Elie Wiesel. This work by Wiesel, born a Romanian Orthodox Jew, describes his existence in the Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps during World War II, during which his parents and sister died. It is considered a classic of Holocaust literature.

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), novel by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This short novel draws on the author's own experience of eight years in a Soviet labor camp. It was the first widely read work exposing repression in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin.

*This Earth of Mankind* (1980), a novel by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. Imprisoned as a political prisoner by Indonesian president Suharto's regime and forbidden to write, Toer dictated this and three other novels to his fellow prisoners. The so-called Buru Quartet, named for the prison, examines the development of Indonesian nationalism.

with, an oral tradition. The narrator refers to himself as "Prophet of Justice" and is addressed as "Gicaandi Player" on the opening page. Extensive use is made of proverbs and riddles in the dialogue; figurative language almost always has a local reference. Songs, particularly Mau Mau liberation songs, are integrated into the narrative.

**Christian Imagery** Christian imagery and allusions feature prominently in all of Ngugi's work. If this seems surprising from someone who does not call himself a Christian, it must be remembered that, as Ngugi regularly points out, Kenyans and especially the Gikuyu are widely Christianized, and the Bible is probably the one

text with which a largely illiterate population is familiar. The Bible thus offers a rich and handy store of characters, events, and symbols for a writer to exploit. Ngugi's cast of characters contains a wealth of Moses, Messiah, and Judas figures alongside allusions and quotations from the book of Psalms, the prophets, and Gospel parables.

### Works in Critical Context

Critics have consistently acknowledged Ngugi as an important voice in African letters. He has been called the voice of the Kenyan people by certain commentators, while others have lauded his novels as among the most underrated and highest quality to come from Africa. Ngugi's fiction has been noted for its overtly political agenda, its attempt to give a literary voice to the poor of Kenya, and its consistent critique of colonization and oppressive regimes. Critics have also praised Ngugi's role as an influential postcolonial African writer, particularly in his portrayal of corrupt postliberation African governments.

**A Grain of Wheat** *A Grain of Wheat* is widely considered by critics to be Ngugi's most successful novel, as he had honed the skills that were less evenly displayed in his first two books. Angus Calder wrote that *A Grain of Wheat* "is arguably the best, and certainly the most underrated novel to come from Black Africa." Taking *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* together, Gerald Moore asserts that these two novels "form the most impressive and original achievement yet, in African fiction."

**Wizard of the Crow** This novel has received near universal praise from critics. Stuart Kelley wrote that he had "every expectation that [Ngugi's] new novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, will be seen in years to come as the equal of [Salman Rushdie's] *Midnight's Children*, [Gunter Grass's] *The Tin Drum*, or [Gabriel García Márquez's] *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; a magisterial magic realist account of 20th-century African history. It is unreservedly a masterpiece."

Other critics praised Ngugi's ability to express the colonial and postcolonial attitudes of Africans as well as his storytelling ability. David Hellman believed that "the effort to throw off the shadow chains of the [colonial] past while establishing an authentically African continuum has been at the thematic center of much African literature, but in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's epic novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, this theme may well have found its ultimate expression." And Scottish-African writer and critic Aminatta Forna noted that "*Wizard of the Crow* is first and foremost a great, spellbinding tale, probably the crowning glory of Ngugi's life's work.... He has turned the power of storytelling into a weapon against totalitarianism."

### Responses to Literature

1. What should the relationship be between education and political activism? Do people have a

responsibility to speak up against oppression and for their beliefs? What if speaking out will put them or their families in danger? What would you do? Write an essay that outlines your responses to these complex questions.

2. Ngugi has asked, "What is the relevance of literature to life?" Write an essay responding to his question. Use specific examples in your response.
3. Write your own definition of *political action*. Did you include writing a novel as being a political act? Why or why not?
4. Research novelist Chinua Achebe's reasons for choosing to write in English. Write an essay analyzing his reasons for doing so, and contrast them with Ngugi's reasons for refusing to write in English. Whose point of view do you agree with more? Why?
5. Research Martinique revolutionary Franz Fanon's political views in terms of liberation and anticolonial movements. Write an essay summarizing his position, then explain your own opinion.

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## Friedrich Nietzsche

BORN: 1844, Röcken, Germany

DIED: 1900, Weimar, Germany

NATIONALITY: German

GENRE: Nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)

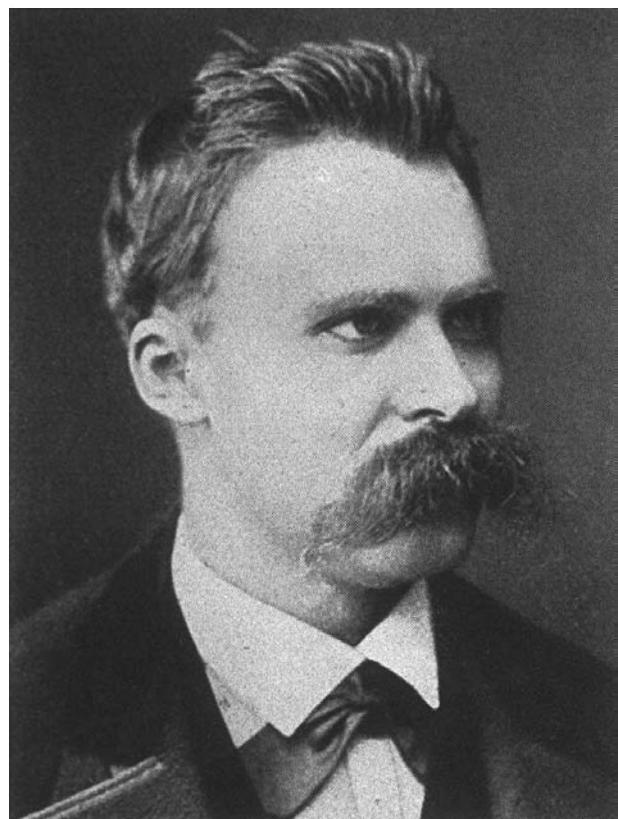
*Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)

*On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887)

*The Will to Power* (1889)

#### Overview

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, believing European society was standing at a critical turning point, foresaw Europe collapsing into nihilism. The advance of scientific enlightenment, in particular the Darwinian theory of evolution, had destroyed the old religious and metaphysical underpinnings for the idea of human dignity. "God is dead," declared Nietzsche's spokesman Zarathustra, and man, no longer "the image of God," is a chance product of a nature indifferent to purpose or value. The great danger is that man will find his existence



Friedrich Nietzsche Popperfoto / Getty Images

meaningless unless a new grounding for values is provided. In works of powerful prose and poetry Nietzsche struggled to head off the catastrophe, writing which has made him the most compelling and provocative figure of German philosophy.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Household of Women** Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844, in Röcken, a Prussian province in Saxony where his father served as a Lutheran pastor in a long line of clergymen. His father was loving to his son, keeping the child close when he wrote sermons and entertaining him with songs at the piano. But in 1846, Pastor Nietzsche, still in his mid-thirties, began suffering blackouts and extreme neurological distress. Three years later he died, and an autopsy reportedly revealed a condition described as “softening” of the brain. This death left Nietzsche in a household of women: his mother, grandmother, several aunts, and a sister, Elisabeth.

The death of Nietzsche’s father meant upheaval for the remaining family. In the spring of 1850, they moved to Naumburg to live with relatives. There, young Nietzsche began studying for the ministry and wrote his first poems and plays. After attending local schools in Naumburg, in 1858 Nietzsche won a scholarship to Pforta, one of the best boarding schools in Germany. Here he received a thorough training in the classics and acquired several lifetime friends. While in school, Nietzsche became increasingly interested in music. He studied piano and, like his father, showed promise as an improviser. But Nietzsche was already suffering the headaches and eye strain that would debilitate him throughout his adult life. The headaches, which had begun when he was ten, were particularly painful, leaving him bedridden for weeks, while the eye strain resulted in burning sensations and blurred vision.

**The Inception of a Disease** At the end of this period of schooling, Nietzsche, who had earlier shared the genuine piety of his family, found that he had now ceased to accept Christianity—a view that soon hardened into outright atheism. With the highest recommendations of his Pforta teachers, Nietzsche enrolled in the University of Bonn in 1864. There he pursued classical studies with philologist Albrecht Ritschl, and when the latter, within the year, moved to Leipzig, Nietzsche followed.

Nietzsche attempted to enter into the social life of the students, even joining a dueling fraternity, but soon discovered that his own mission in life had isolated him from the pursuits and interests that most other students shared. Some scholars theorize that it was at this time that Nietzsche contracted syphilis, a venereal disease that was incurable at the time, in a Leipzig brothel, which may have been the cause of his later madness (late-stage syph-

ilis causes madness). In the 1890s, the insane Nietzsche prompted such speculation when he confessed to having had deliberately exposed himself to the disease on two occasions in 1866. But even these revelations are rendered dubious by his questionable sanity during disclosure. By the middle of his life, Nietzsche suffered almost constantly from migraines and gastric upsets. Loneliness and physical pain were the constant background of his life—though Nietzsche later came to interpret them as the necessary conditions for his work.

**The Birth of Nietzschean Philosophy** Nietzsche’s early publications in classical philology so impressed Ritschl that when a chair of philology opened up at Basel, he secured it for Nietzsche, then only 24 years old and still without his degree. The University of Leipzig awarded the chair to Nietzsche on the strength of his writings without requiring an examination, and Nietzsche entered into a teaching career. When Nietzsche took up residence in Basel, German composer Richard Wagner was nearby at Tribschen, and Nietzsche was soon drawn into his circle. Wagner was then at work on the Ring Cycle and on the great festival at Bayreuth that would soon present its premiere. The project needed publicity and financial support, and was backed by many German intellectuals. Nietzsche entered into this cause with enthusiasm and for several years was a frequent house-guest at Tribschen. Friendship with the charismatic but egocentric Wagner was, however, short-lived due to Nietzsche’s independence of thought, the quality he most valued.

Prior to the break, Wagner had greatly influenced Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which gave an imaginative account of the forces that led to the rise of Athenian tragedy and to its subsequent decline. Nietzsche ended the book with a rousing advocacy of Wagner’s musical drama as a revival of Hellenic tragedy. No sooner had the book been published than Nietzsche began to perceive the difference between Wagner’s musical genius and the shabby pseudo-philosophy of the Wagnerian cult. From then on, though he still felt affection for Wagner himself, Nietzsche attacked ever more vigorously the decadence of Wagner’s political and philosophical ideas. Two works of his last year of writing would deal with the subject: *The Wagner Case* (1888) and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888).

**The Rejection by Salomé** In late spring, 1882, while awaiting publication of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche vacationed with Paul Ree in Italy. There Nietzsche met Lou Salomé, a young, independent woman who had already impressed Ree during philosophical discussions. Nietzsche also responded immediately to Salomé’s independent demeanor and he was soon confiding his thoughts on religion and morality while hiking with her in the mountains and fields. Eventually, Nietzsche, Salomé, and Ree formed plans to platonically share living quarters. Nietzsche greatly anticipated this arrangement as his first

possibility for steady companionship in many years. But when Nietzsche, increasingly giddy from Salomé's friendship, professed to Salomé sensual desires for her, she fled with Ree. Subsequent correspondence was minimal, and Nietzsche soon found himself alone and ignored. Scholars have since cited this painful break with Salomé as a possible explanation for the cruel misogyny of Nietzsche's subsequent works.

**The Magnum Opus** Nietzsche's teaching at Basel was frequently interrupted by prolonged bouts of sickness and by several months of service as a medical orderly during the Franco-Prussian War, a conflict that led to the unification of various regions into the German Empire. In April 1879 his health had deteriorated so much that he was driven to resign. He was given a small pension and began a ten-year period of wandering in search of a tolerable climate. Though racked by increasing pain from the relentless progression of his disease, Nietzsche would manage to produce ten substantial books before his final collapse, works now belonging to the first rank of German literature and containing a provocative set of philosophical ideas.

After publishing his landmark philosophical work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche undertook revision of an earlier work, *Human, All Too Human*, and its sequels. Following these he also felt compelled to articulate his beliefs in straightforward prose, and from the summer of 1885 to early 1886 he wrote with this purpose. The result was *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, a caustic condemnation of conventional morality. In this nine-part volume, Nietzsche applied the concept of the will to power to specific philosophical issues, including the will to truth and the will to morality. Objective truth, Nietzsche had already proclaimed in *Untimely Meditations*, was unprovable; in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he applied the same logic to refuting notions of the self, thus reducing even human existence to the will to power.

The period in which Nietzsche wrote *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* was full of personal anguish. His health was constantly poor, and conflict with his publisher, who was bankrupt from promoting anti-Semitic literature, further aggravated the already bedeviled Nietzsche. By early 1883 when he heard of Wagner's death, he lapsed into still another bout of physical distress. He also experienced strained relations with his sister, who had married—on Wagner's birthday—notorious anti-Semite Bernhard Foerster. For Nietzsche, the prospect of relations with a bigoted brother-in-law were immensely distasteful, and he even missed the wedding to avoid introductions.

By mid-1887, Nietzsche was prepared to resume writing. He had already published aphorisms, poems, and sequential diatribes, but with his next work, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), he attempted a more formal polemic. Here he addressed three specific philosophical

issues—the nature of good and evil, the essence of guilt, and the meaning of asceticism—and related each subject to the failings of Christian morality. Portraying Christianity as a sado-masochistic, ultimately self-destructive order, and following his logic that the will to truth was a will to nothingness, he now added that the will to morality would prove similarly futile for Christianity. Christian morality would be destroyed by its dogmatism, a decline he called "the great spectacle" of his age.

In 1888, Nietzsche went to Turin, Italy, and wrote *Twilight of the Idols; or, How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, a seething, anti-Christian, anti-German work full of irony and sarcasm. Despite the poisonous tone of the book, Nietzsche was refreshed by his new surroundings and even considered moving his mother there with him. But his optimism was soon undermined by a disastrous trip to Switzerland, where he endured days of vomiting, and a return to his suddenly chilly home. Impoverished from a lack of steady income, Nietzsche aggravated his financial troubles by paying for publication of his new works, and was thus without means to keep warm during a cold spell that extended into June and July. After a late summer vacationing with friends, he returned to Turin to write *The Antichrist*, an alternately analytical and unreasoning account of Christianity and its destructive impact on humanity in the context of its relationship to Judaism.

Upon completion of the book, Nietzsche is said to have experienced a final euphoria or final delusions. He believed citizens of Turin basked in his presence, that shop owners and merchants gave him preferential treatment, and that his physique was more youthful. He even wrote cheerful notes to friends describing the sunny, tree-lined boulevards. Especially refuting these perceptions, however, is biographer Ronald Hayman, who notes that Turin's climate was actually rainy and Nietzsche's own home was particularly drab.

Nietzsche celebrated his forty-fourth birthday by beginning *Ecce Homo*, a flamboyant account of his life and work. In what Kaufmann calls "one of the great treasures of world literature," Nietzsche presented stunning, if often brazen, insights into his own life and work, titling chapters with such grandiose lines as "Why I Am So Clever" and "Why I Write Such Good Books," and making such bold statements as, "I am by far the most terrible human being that has existed so far; this does not preclude the possibility that I shall be the most beneficial."

Nietzsche completed *Ecce Homo* within weeks, and became progressively worse, physically and mentally. In letters he wrote how his facial features were difficult to control and that he would often smile for long periods. Everything seemed to be achieved with the greatest ease. And, he would soon suggest, he was destined to rule the world. Nietzsche was eventually taken to a clinic, where he alternately strolled the halls muttering to himself or remained in bed. When his mother arrived from

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Nietzsche's famous contemporaries include:

**William James** (1842–1910): American philosopher and pioneer in the field of psychology.

**Randolph Caldecott** (1846–1886): British artist and illustrator for whom the Caldecott Medal was named.

**Dame Ellen Terry** (1847–1928): British actress who came to be known as the best Shakespearean actress in Britain in her time.

**Czar Nicholas II** (1868–1918): The last czar of Russia. He ruled from 1894 to 1917, when he abdicated in response to pressure by revolutionaries. He and his family were executed in 1918.

Naumburg, Nietzsche recognized her and showed relatively stable behavior before proclaiming himself a tyrant and degenerating into lunacy once again. After staying in an asylum, where he believed someone was trying to shoot him, Nietzsche moved to Naumburg under his mother's care. In 1897, when his mother died, he was tended by his sister Elisabeth, whose husband had previously committed suicide.

Nietzsche was too incoherent to appreciate that since his breakdown he had become famous through the efforts of scholars such as Georg Brandes. Elisabeth, however, realized that the family still possessed several volumes of unpublished material, including *Ecce Homo* and many notebooks, and she exploited her brother's newfound fame. She hired anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner to instruct her on the fundamentals of her brother's philosophy and cultivated a new image as a social benefactor. Her new lifestyle was entirely supported by Nietzsche's now lucrative writings, which she augmented in new editions with her own comments. Among her most notorious literary enterprises was the suppression of *Ecce Homo*, which she pillaged for her own literary purposes, and an entirely forged work, *My Sister and I*, attributed to Nietzsche.

By August of 1900, Nietzsche had been signing his last letters "Dionysus the Crucified," had suffered two strokes, was immobile and inarticulate, and had incurred a respiratory infection. On August 24, following a third stroke, he died. Elisabeth arranged a final fate that doubtlessly would have enraged him: a Christian burial replete with a solemn benediction that included the phrase, "Hallowed be thy name for future generations."

### Works in Literary Context

**The Will to Power** In his constructive works, Nietzsche sought to find a force in life itself that would serve to

set human existence apart. He found it in the hypothesis of the will to power—the urge to dominate and master. All creatures desire this, but only humankind has achieved sufficient power to turn the force back upon itself. Self-mastery, self-overcoming: these are the qualities that give a unique value to human life. The ideal man, the "superman," will achieve a fierce joy in mastering his own existence, ordering his passions, and giving style to his character. Self-overcoming will release in him a flood of creative energy. The lives of such men will be the justification of reality; their preferences will constitute the standard of value. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche pronounced the will to power as the basic motivating force of human action, the will to power characterized as the will to overcome one's weaknesses and embrace difficulties, both moral and social. To overcome one's failings is to become, according to Nietzsche, the superman.

**The Concept of Eternal Recurrence** In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche also conceived of eternal recurrence, which he ranked above the will to power and the superman as the principal tenet of his entire philosophy. Derived from scientific formulations regarding energy conservation, eternal recurrence was defined by Nietzsche as a recycling of everything in endless repetition throughout time. In later volumes, notably *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche elaborated on this theory and shaped it into an integral part of the will to power. But in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche's conception is nearly theological instead of philosophical—with the will to power revealed by a devil who is hailed as a god for his disclosure.

**Influences** Important for Nietzsche's intellectual development was his discovery and extensive reading from the works of the Greek philosophers, along with the philosophers Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Lange, John Stuart Mill, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Baruch de Spinoza, as well as those he had shared ideas with or expressed affinity for: the seventeenth-century French moralists, Darwinists, and authors on a list including everyone from Leo Tolstoy to Charles Baudelaire.

In turn, worshipped by some as the savior of humanity and damned by others as its foe, he has had a profound, volatile influence on later and contemporary peoples and thought. Left-wing Germans of the 1890s began to follow his work, while right-wing Germans wanted to censor and ban it—though this faction would eventually come to use Nietzsche's works as inspiration for their militaristic points of view. Likewise, the anti-Semitic right-wing French faction opposed the left-wing individualists and intellectuals, the Nietzscheans, while Nazi Germans (ironically, connected at some point to Wagner) identified with Nietzsche, and several esteemed philosophers—from Michel Foucault to Jacques Derrida to Albert Camus—have since been informed by his work.

## Works in Critical Context

Nietzsche's far-reaching, controversial concepts such as "eternal recurrence" and the "superman" marked him as an insignificant eccentric during much of his career, and though he labored in obscurity he anticipated the day when his ideas would be realized in all their power and magnitude. "I know my fate," he wrote in 1888 before succumbing to insanity. "One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man. I am dynamite."

While most of his ideas and many of his works have gained popularity and loyalty, many standing out as most often read, re-read, studied, discussed, and even adopted, there are particular works that are considered most impacting, among them *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

***Beyond Good and Evil* (1886)** With its searing criticisms of conventional morality and German culture, *Beyond Good and Evil* ranks among Nietzsche's most vehement and vicious diatribes, one even Nietzsche admitted was "devoid of any good-natured word." However disturbing, with its exposition of the will to power and its stirring criticisms of Christianity, *Beyond Good and Evil* must also be considered one of Nietzsche's most profound works, and some critics have even cited it among the most important works of Nietzsche's era. Walter Kaufmann has been especially enthusiastic, calling it "one of the great books of the nineteenth-century."

***Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883)** Upon Lou Salomé's rejection of his rare advances, Nietzsche returned to the melancholy of solitude and to working on what is also considered one of his greatest works. In this verse epic—which developed into four volumes over the next two years—Nietzsche altered his theories of the will to power and eternal recurrence and introduced his most popular, and most misunderstood, concept, that of the *übermensch*, or superman.

*Zarathustra*, with its explication of the will to power and characterization of the superman, is probably Nietzsche's most popular work. Its poetry alone renders it a classic of German literature, and its far-reaching philosophy establishes it as a seminal work in nihilism and existentialism. In 1888, Nietzsche expressed the belief of many contemporary scholars when he said that *Zarathustra* was his finest achievement. "Among my writings my *Zarathustra* stands to my mind by itself," he wrote in the preface to *Ecce Homo*. "With that I have given mankind the greatest present that has ever been made to it so far." He added that *Zarathustra*, which he had conceived as an alternative to the Christian Bible's New Testament, was "the highest book there is."

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Writing to analyze and criticize an old system of values or to formulate a new system, Nietzsche aimed in all his work to provide a new meaning for human existence in a meaningless world. In the absence of any higher power, men must create their own values, he maintained. Here are a few works by writers who also produced similar philosophical assertions:

*The Reality of the Mass Media* (2000), a nonfiction work by Niklas Luhmann. A thorough discussion of the moralizing or demoralizing of a culture by way of contemporary media/technology.

*The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), a philosophical essay by Albert Camus. Futility, absurdity, and meaninglessness compose the approach by the author, who explores humanity's hopeless attempts to understand human existence.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), a philosophical essay by Simone de Beauvoir. In this well-conceived departure from existential philosophy as Nietzsche commanded it, the author explores freedom and free will, politics and phenomenology, and much more.

## Responses to Literature

1. After reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, consider how you would explain the concept of the will to power to someone who knows nothing of Nietzsche or his concepts.
2. Several philosophers throughout history have offered allegory and recognizable, concrete objects to their readers to illustrate profound concepts. Plato used the cave, for instance; Camus had Sisyphus. Kierkegaard referred to the abyss. What allegory or objects would you use to explain Nietzsche's concepts of the will to power and eternal recurrence?
3. Considering the sociopolitical climate in Germany during Nietzsche's time, why was it, in your view, that Nietzsche's popularity went in waves? With which groups was he popular at that time, with which was he not? Why? With which groups might he be popular today?

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## Josephina Niggli

BORN: 1910, Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico

DIED: 1983, Cullowhee, North Carolina

NATIONALITY: Mexican, American

GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Mexican Silhouettes* (1928)

*Soldier-Woman* (1936)

*Mexican Folk Plays* (1938)

*Mexican Village* (1945)

*Step Down, Elder Brother* (1947)

### Overview

A novelist and playwright whose work is set entirely in Mexico, Josephina Niggli informs readers with her profound knowledge of Mexican customs, traditions, and history. Today she is best known not only for acquainting her readers with the struggles that would bring about the birth of modern Mexico but also for shunning popular stereotypes to capture the true flavor of northern Mexican culture. In doing so, Niggli demonstrates many of the sensibilities that would develop into a full-blown literary movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***Mexican and American Traditions*** Josephina Niggli was born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico, on July 13, 1910. Her father, Frederick Ferdinand Niggli, was a Texan who managed a cement factory in Mexico; her mother, Goldie Morgan Niggli, was a violinist. Niggli was brought up in a bicultural environment, learning English and Spanish as well as American and Mexican traditions.

The young Niggli came to the United States with her parents in 1913 during the Mexican Revolution. She was homeschooled by her mother until she began attending Main Avenue High School, a Catholic school in San Antonio, Texas. The family returned to Mexico in 1920,



Josephina Niggli Photo courtesy of Western Carolina University

but Niggli was sent back when the violence in Mexico continued. She studied at Incarnate Word College, where she earned her bachelor of arts degree in 1931. It was during this time that Niggli seriously considered becoming a writer, and she began writing for publication in such periodicals as *Mexican Life* and *Ladies' Home Journal*.

***Early Literary Successes*** Niggli's early pieces established her as a popular-fiction writer and poet who had won prizes for her earliest efforts—including a fiction-writing prize awarded by *Ladies' Home Journal* and a poetry prize for her entry in the National Catholic Poetry Contest. In 1928, Niggli's father saw to the publication of her first poetry collection, *Mexican Silhouettes*. The poems in this collection reflect her identity with her native homeland.

According to biographer and critic Catherine Cucinella in *American Women Writers, 1900–1945*, Niggli spent four years studying theater and playwriting with the San Antonio Little Theater after graduating from Incarnate Word College. In 1935, she entered the Carolina Playmakers graduate program at the University of North Carolina and received her master's degree in drama in 1937. Niggli wrote the play *Singing Valley* as her thesis for the program.

***Theatrical Successes*** In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Niggli saw production of several of her plays.

Plays such as *The Fair-God*, *The Cry of Dolores*, and *Azteca* were historical dramas about Mexico. Other plays, including *Soldadera* and *This is Villa!* focused on the Mexican Revolution. As her work continued to gain popularity, Niggli's plays were included in literary anthologies.

**Teacher and Novelist** Niggli was well on her way as a playwright. With a 1938 Fellowship of the Bureau of New Plays, Niggli moved to the East Coast and began teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Niggli taught courses in radio, television, theater arts, and speech. In 1945 the University of North Carolina Press published her first and most famous work, *Mexican Village*, a collection of ten related stories about life in rural Mexico. The book won Niggli the Mayflower Cup Award for "best book of the year by a North Carolinian." Two years later Niggli saw the publication of a novel, *Step Down, Elder Brother* (1947). This latter work was so successful that it was featured as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.

**Hollywood and Dublin** In 1948 Niggli was called to Hollywood to work on the screenplay for *Mexican Village*. The movie adaptation appeared in 1953, titled *Sombrero*. After Hollywood, Niggli was awarded another fellowship, one that took her to Dublin, Ireland. There she visited the Abbey Theatre, where she studied the performances—an effort she would do again in 1954 in Bristol, England, at the Old Vic School.

In 1956 Niggli accepted a professorship at Western Carolina University as a drama and journalism instructor. She remained there until her retirement in 1975. The playwright and novelist slowed her efforts, but published two more works. In 1964, she published a young adult book, *A Miracle for Mexico*; in 1967 she presented the popular guide *New Pointers on Playwriting*. Niggli died on December 17, 1983 in her home in Cullowhee, North Carolina.

## Works in Literary Context

**Local Color: Mexican Village Life** Throughout her drama and fiction, the most significant influence is Niggli's vivid depictions of Mexico and Mexican life. She reveals knowledge of Mexican customs, traditions, and history. Some of her works analyze the role of women from a bicultural perspective. Other works depict the Mexican Revolution in a realistic way, acquainting readers with the struggles that would bring about the birth of modern Mexico. In *Mexican Village*, for example, Niggli conveys the rich and varied aspects of life in small-town Mexico. She relies on folktale and lore to enhance the tale.

In all of Niggli's work, village life is extensively revealed. Tradition is seen as an immensely important aspect of village life, and social customs are emphasized as key elements in day-to-day activities. These social values figure as strongly in Niggli's themes as they do

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Niggli's famous contemporaries include:

**Jean Anouilh** (1910–1987): Prolific French playwright, his works range from absurdist to high drama.

**Albert Camus** (1913–1960): Philosophical writer who was the second-youngest Nobel Prize recipient. Although associated with existentialism, he rejected the label for, more accurately, "nihilism."

**Eudora Welty** (1909–2001): American fiction writer, she was widely known for her writings about the South.

**Adolfo López Mateos** (1909–1969): President of Mexico from 1958 to 1964. He was a noted supporter of the arts and education.

in her style—offering explorations of issues important to the people, those concerning identity, class, and tradition.

## Works in Critical Context

Niggli has distinguished herself with critics in a variety of media and literary genres. As a playwright, she has won particular acclaim for her one-act works, and as a novelist she has been recognized as a formidable local colorist.

***Mexican Village* (1945)** Upon publication, *Mexican Village* was hailed as a classic portrait of small-town Mexico. Orville Prescott, in *Yale Review*, declared that Niggli "is steeped in Mexican atmosphere" and added that *Mexican Village* is "an utterly engaging book by a richly gifted writer." Similarly, J. H. Jackson wrote in the *Weekly Book Review* that Niggli's novel is "without a peer in its field." "The American reader," Jackson continued, "will understand this particular Mexico . . . better, after he has read *Mexican Village*, than ever before."

Reviewers of *Mexican Village* also praised Niggli's narrative sensibility and her skill in creating believable characters. *New York Times* critic Mildred Adams noted the work's "pace and charm," while Prescott wrote in *Yale Review* that Niggli "is a strong advocate of the old-fashioned story-telling virtues." *Booklist* reviewer J. T. Frederick noted that the book's "characters and incidents are warm with human reality." And as Cucinella quotes critic Raymund A. Paredes saying in his essay *The Evolution of Chicano Literature*, Niggli's "*Mexican Village* is a landmark in Mexican-American history."

## Responses to Literature

1. Research Mexico—its history, geography, culture, and people. Choose one of Niggli's folk plays, and in an essay, explain how the setting contributes to the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Niggli uses local color in her works, featuring particular habits, values, customs, regional ways of speech, and traditions to characterize the work and give it realism. Here are a few works by writers who also emphasize local color and write about social or personal issues concerning local values, traditions, and mores:

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), a novella by Sarah Orne Jewett. This work offers the local color of a fishing village community in Maine.

*For the Major* (1883), a novella by Constance Fenimore Cooper. This early work is centered in the United States in the post-Civil War South.

"Gimpel the Fool" (1953), a short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. This short story features life in the shtetl, the Jewish village.

"The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1869), a short story by Bret Harte. This piece features the pioneering West in the fictional California town of Poker Flat.

story line. How does the setting help to characterize the people? How does the setting affect the mood and theme?

2. Niggli is known to use local color to enhance her stories, including using Spanish words and phrases. Find several examples of Spanish locutions and phrases in *Mexican Village*. Comment on how this writing technique affects the realism of the story.
3. Niggli often uses gender stereotypes in her work. After reading *Soldadera*, discuss the significance of Niggli's portrayal of women. Provide evidence from the text to support your discussions.

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## Anaïs Nin

BORN: 1903, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France

DIED: 1977, Los Angeles, California

NATIONALITY: French, American

GENRE: Nonfiction, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Diary of Anaïs Nin* (1966–1977)

*D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* (1932)

*Cities of the Interior* (1946–1961)

*Delta of Venus* (1977)

### Overview

Anaïs Nin gained international fame with the publication of seven volumes of unabashedly introspective and candid diaries laced with fiction. In addition to her diaries, Nin also wrote novels, short stories, and erotica, all of which reflect her attention to physical details along with the effects of sensuality on her characters. Bold, innovative, and determined, Nin's work transcends conventional standards and calls for an expanded definition of literary art. By challenging the impediments of literary form and genre, Nin was able to explore methods of expression that allowed some understanding of the individual's hidden psyche.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

*A Cosmopolitan Childhood* Anaïs Nin was born on February 21, 1903, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris, to Joaquin and Rosa Culmell de Nin. As a result of her father's travels as a concert pianist and composer, Nin lived a cosmopolitan childhood, visiting various



Anaïs Nin *Nin, Anaïs*, photograph. The Library of Congress.

European capital cities, until her father deserted the family in 1914. Nin's mother relocated from Barcelona to New York City that summer, a move that prompted Nin to begin a diary as a letter to her father. Begun when she was eleven, this "letter" would continue throughout the rest of her life and become an important record not only of the development of a feminine tradition in literature, but also of the creative process.

**Independent Adolescence and Romantic Affairs**  
Precocious and energetic, Nin largely educated herself during adolescence, reading in public libraries and writing in her journal, in which she carried on an imaginative relationship with her absent father. In her late teens, she studied art and often worked as a model for artists and photographers. When she was eighteen, Nin fell in love with Hugh Guiler, a banker she married in Havana, Cuba, two years later. Despite Nin's numerous affairs and her bigamous marriage to Rupert Cole, her union with Guiler lasted more than fifty years.

### Art and Entanglement

Nin's ambition to be a writer was supported by Guiler: Under the name Ian Hugo, he illustrated Nin's books. When she was twenty-two, Nin and Guiler settled in Paris, and Nin briefly reunited with her father. The artis-

tic atmosphere of Paris provided Nin the opportunity to free herself from social convention in order to develop as a writer, and she worked on an assortment of projects during the 1920s and 1930s that never reached fruition as novels, but appeared piecemeal as prose poems, novellas, and short stories. Despite her attempts at fiction, Nin's first significant literary contribution was *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, a work that reveals Nin's struggle for aesthetic realization on her own terms. In fact, in responding to the fiction of Lawrence, Nin describes what she herself would do as a novelist instead of what Lawrence had done, in essence preparing for the emergence of her own fiction.

**Work Banned as Pornographic** Nevertheless, it was almost five years after her study of Lawrence that Nin found her voice in fiction. During these years, Nin became intimately involved with American writer Henry Miller, whose works were banned in England and the United States as pornographic. Authors like Miller and Nin played a key role in advancing what later became known as the sexual revolution of the Western world. In 1961 Miller challenged existing obscenity laws in the United States with publication of *Tropic of Cancer*; a legal battle ensued and, ultimately, Miller's work was labeled a work of literature and freed subsequent novels from similar legal constraints. Nin became involved with Miller's wife, June, and psychotherapist Otto Rank. With suggestions from Henry Miller and Rank, Nin produced *The House of Incest* (1936) and *The Winter of Artifice* (1939), both intense, original, and poetic, but neither of them novels. While *The House of Incest* is clearly influenced by surrealism, and explores the human psyche through dreams, *The Winter of Artifice* thinly disguises real people and situations from Nin's diary. "Lilith," for example, is the story of a disappointing reunion between a woman and the father who had deserted her in her childhood, while "Djuna" tells of a love triangle that parallels the relationship between Nin and Henry and June Miller depicted in Nin's diary.

**Artistic Freedom** In the early 1940s, Nin moved to New York, where commercial publishers were unresponsive to her writing. Dedicated to her art, she sought readership by establishing the Gemor Press and printing her work at her own expense. Her first Gemor publication, a shortened version of *The Winter of Artifice*, captured the attention of poet William Carlos Williams, who praised Nin's quest for a female approach to writing that showed art, not activism. As Nin continued to explore how she could unify narrative fragments without restricting them to a central plot as did traditional novels, Gemor Press issued *This Hunger*, a work that helped land her a contract with the E. P. Dutton publishing company.

Tired of life in New York, Nin moved to California in 1946, settling into an environment of artistic freedom that was less frantic and confining than New York or Paris. Between 1946 and 1961, Nin published *Cities of*

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Nin's famous contemporaries include:

- Tennessee Williams** (1911–1983): American playwright who based many of his works, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), on his family experiences.
- Jackson Pollock** (1912–1956): A key figure in Abstract Expressionism and avant-garde art in America after World War II.
- Doris Lessing** (1919–): In *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Lessing compartmentalizes life by approaching experience from different fictional perspectives, including parody and political documentation.
- W. H. Auden** (1907–1973): British-born poet who, like Nin, spent much of his later professional life in the United States.
- Lázaro Cárdenas** (1895–1970): President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940, Cárdenas is known for his attempts to carry out the social and economic goals of the Mexican Revolution.
- Irving Berlin** (1888–1989): American composer who wrote the lyrics to countless classic songs, including "God Bless America."

*the Interior*, which she described as a "continuous novel." The work is composed of five parts: *Ladders to Fire* (1946), *Children of the Albatross* (1947), *The Four-Chambered Heart* (1950), *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954), and *Seduction of the Minotaur* (1961). Early in the *Cities of the Interior* series, Nin became more sure of herself as a writer who could not be bound by convention.

### Life in a Collage

Published in 1964, *Collages* was Nin's self-proclaimed last novel. Most of the stories in the work involve a single character who is the common thread in a series of vignettes that reinforce Nin's view of creative freedom. *Collages* is the most autobiographical of her fiction, as characters' real-life counterparts are not concealed, and the factual events recorded in Nin's diaries are embellished with fictional elements. As such, *Collages* paved the way for the publication of Nin's diary volumes, beginning in 1966. The last volumes of her diaries appeared posthumously in the 1980s, after Nin's death from cancer on January 14, 1977, as did two collections of erotic pieces, *Delta of Venus* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979).

### Works in Literary Context

Nin's work, particularly her novels and short stories, are significantly influenced by surrealism, a movement founded

in Paris in the 1920s by artists devoted to exploring irrationality and the unconscious. In addition, the textual experiments of such modernists as Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, whose narrative techniques included expressionistic and stream-of-consciousness narration, helped shape Nin's writing. Perhaps the most powerful influence on Nin was the literary partnership she had with Henry Miller. Despite their differences in both personal and professional matters—Nin was elegant and sensual, Miller crude and sexual; Nin's writing was implicit, Miller's explicit—the two inspired and provided valuable feedback for each other for more than three decades. In addition to Miller, Woolf, and Lawrence, Nin enjoyed the influence of other authors including Marcel Proust, André Gide, Jean Cocteau, Paul Valéry, and Arthur Rimbaud.

**Transformation** Although Nin's diaries have led to her being criticized as a narcissist, such charges seem unsubstantiated in light of her psychological insight, the feminist perspective of her works, and her quest for self-knowledge. More than a recurring theme, Nin's preoccupation with personal creation—specifically, that of the female psyche—marks her diaries and novels alike. An optimist in a world of psychological desolation, Nin contended that individuals are obligated to pursue completeness, even though the journey is difficult and one's success not guaranteed.

Nin used the word "transformation" to describe the conversion of a negative situation into a positive experience, an act she believed every individual has the power to do by changing external circumstances to suit one's personal needs. In all of Nin's fiction, characters have opportunities to solve their problems by being resourceful and creative. Her work explores the psychological barriers women face and the importance of overcoming those obstacles in order to reach a state of inner peace in their personal lives. In *Cities of the Interior*, for example, the female faces a basic duality: the compulsion to please and nurture others as opposed to her own self-fulfillment. Unlike women in her erotica, however, the female characters in *Cities of the Interior* are rendered psychologically powerless by this situation.

**Eroticism** Although Nin believed that eroticism had its place in literature, she opposed completely focusing on sexuality at the expense of literary merit. At risk of not being taken seriously as a writer, Nin, aware that American literature was lacking female sexual expression, intended for her work to describe sexual experience from a woman's point of view as an avenue of learning about the nature of the true self and transcending ordinary life. Whereas all five parts of *Cities of the Interior* accentuate the sexual experiences of her main characters, their eroticism is not gratuitous; instead, like all other worthwhile experiences, sexuality leads to self-knowledge. Although far from popular Nin was influential in that she tested the

social norms of sexuality in the context of literature, challenging previous definitions of acceptability.

### Works in Critical Context

With the exception of Edmund Wilson's favorable review of *Under a Glass Bell* in the *New Yorker*, response to Nin's work was generally hostile or indifferent. Certainly for many years she was neglected as a serious writer by critics as well as readers, garnering only a few books of criticism through the years. With the publication of the first volume of her diary in 1966, combined with the women's movement of the 1970s, Nin's readership grew; however, focus was almost solely on the diaries, not her fiction.

**Criticism of Novels** When her first three novels were reissued in 1974, the few positive reviews Nin received for her poetic style and psychological insights were overshadowed by voices of disapproval. Called tedious, abstract, and obscure, Nin's writing was further attacked as intrusive and editorial in its narrative. Her characters, according to some critics, were unattractively self-absorbed.

In *Anaïs Nin and the Discovery of Inner Space* (1962), scholar Oliver Evans refutes arguments presented by Frank Baldanza in *Anaïs Nin* (1962) that Nin's writing is merely "pointless, rambling explorations of erotic entanglements and neurotic fears." Evans, in turn, praises Nin's rhythmic language and psychoanalytic insight. However, Evans evaluates only Nin's fiction. Criticism in the years that have followed is centered on her multi-volume diary.

**Criticism of Erotica** To a great extent, Nin's more recent fame rests on her reputation as a writer of erotica. Much of this attention is the result of the short erotic pieces that were collected and published in the late 1970s as *Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds*. Of great interest in 1986 was the appearance of *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin*, which revealed the love triangle involving Nin, Henry Miller, and June Miller. Philip Kaufman adapted this particular section of Nin's diary for his 1990 film *Henry and June*.

### Responses to Literature

1. Nin's diaries were not originally written with the intention of being published. In this sense, like all diaries, they were not meant to be read in the way her other, crafted work was. In your opinion, is it possible for such work to have literary or artistic merit? If a writer reworks his or her own diaries with an eye toward publication—dramatizing certain elements, improving descriptions, or expanding upon certain insights—does the work lose some of its authenticity as a true living record?
2. Much of Nin's writing is considered erotic. The same is true of author Henry Miller, with whom Nin had a

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Even as all seven volumes of Anaïs Nin's diaries record a woman's journey of self-discovery, they also reveal her emphasis on the importance of creativity in an individual's life. Throughout the years, Nin has been a source of inspiration for those who are willing to take professional or personal risks for the sake of art, including the authors of the works below:

*Atlas Shrugged* (1957), a novel by Ayn Rand. In this lengthy work, Rand explores a variety of themes that, ultimately, she would develop into a philosophy of life, which she later termed "objectivism."

*Our Lady* (2001), a painting by Alma Lopez. Mexican-born Lopez outraged many Catholics with her representation of the Virgin Mary wearing a bikini of flowers.

*Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel by Salman Rushdie. Rushdie earned a fatwa (an edict calling for his death) from the spiritual leader of Iran for this comic allegorical story that continues to earn praise for its satiric artistry as well as its psychological truths and self-consciousness.

*Tender Buttons* (1933), a poetry collection by Gertrude Stein. Though some considered Stein's linguistic techniques vulgar distortions of the English language, she persisted in developing her own poetic methods.

passionate affair. However, Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) was widely praised by critics even as it was banned for its obscene content. Nin's work remained largely obscure, with her most explicit writing remaining unpublished for several decades. Do you think this represents a fundamental difference in how male and female writers are perceived by readers, or do you think the difference between the two is based mostly on the difference in literary quality of their work? Could the truth lie somewhere in between? Explain your opinion.

3. Nin said, "Love never dies a natural death." What do you think this quote means? How do you think this reflects Nin's own experiences with love in her life?

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## Lewis Nkosi

BORN: 1936, Durban, Natal, South Africa

NATIONALITY: South African

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1965)

*Malcom* (1972)

*Mating Birds* (1983)

### Overview

Known in the United Kingdom for his analytical studies of contemporary African literature, Lewis Nkosi gained attention in the United States with *Mating Birds*, his first work of fiction. In addition to being a respected novelist and literary critic, he is also noted for his forthright comments about the cultural and political developments in Africa under the apartheid system. Although Nkosi was exiled from South Africa in 1960 and later settled in Switzerland, he continues to be considered one of Africa's greatest writers.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A New African** Lewis Nkosi was born in Durban, Natal, South Africa, on December 5, 1936. He attended local schools before enrolling at M. L. Sultan Technical College in Durban. Nkosi began his career in Johannesburg, writing for the magazine *Drum*, a legendary publication founded by and for African writers, people whom Nkosi described in *Home and Exile and Other Selections* as being "the new African[s] cut adrift from the tribal reserve—urbanized, eager, fast-talking, and brash." According to many scholars, Nkosi himself fit such a description.

**Apartheid's Effects** Nkosi grew up under a system known as apartheid, which is Afrikaans for "separateness." This government-sponsored system involved designating certain buildings, areas, and services for use only by certain races and forbade people of different races from marrying. It also led to the segregation of



Lewis Nkosi Doris Poklekowski / Writer Pictures / drr.net

living areas within South Africa, with black citizens of different cultural groups kept separate from each other; this allowed the white Afrikaners, who made up a small percentage of the population, to remain in control of the large nonwhite population. These were some of the issues Nkosi was concerned with as a writer and as an African.

Because the pieces he wrote for *Drum* deal with the social and political developments in his homeland during apartheid, Nkosi faced strict regulations on his writing and was eventually not allowed to comment on the regime. When he accepted a fellowship to study at Harvard in 1961, he was given a one-way exit permit, meaning he was forbidden by the South African government to return to his country. After becoming a literature professor, Nkosi held positions at universities in the United States, Poland, and Zambia, all the while continuing to write about and criticize events in South Africa. Settling for a time in England, he taught and published articles about African literature, along with several dramas and screenplays. Since 1994, the year Nelson Mandela was elected South Africa's first black president in the country's first democratic election, Nkosi has visited his home frequently and currently divides his time between South Africa and Basel, Switzerland.

### Works in Literary Context

Although many would argue that the apartheid system has been the most significant influence on Nkosi's writing, his works have obviously been influenced by other sources as well. For instance, several scholars have compared the surreal, mysterious atmosphere surrounding the crime in *Mating Birds* to that of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. In addition, Nkosi's dramatic works, especially *The Rhythm of Violence*, reflect the inspiration of

French playwright Jean Genet, particularly as seen in Nkosi's technique of using characters who exemplify their own most despicable fantasies.

**Apartheid** The most prominent recurring theme in Nkosi's work has been the effects of apartheid, the policy of racial discrimination and white political domination implemented by the South African National Party when it came to power in 1948. From regulations affecting daily routines—for instance, which hospitals, schools, and theaters people of different races were allowed to attend—to laws that prohibited nonwhite people from voting or holding office, apartheid ensured the political and economic supremacy of the white population, which was comprised less than 20 percent of South Africa's total population. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., "As a playwright and short-story writer, [Nkosi] is . . . the most subtly experimental of the black South African writers, many of whom are caught in the immediacy of the struggle against apartheid." With his documentation of South Africa's apartheid system, Nkosi's legacy lies not only in African literature, but also in South Africa's political history. Academic Alan Ryan offers this tribute: "Nkosi's quiet voice is likely to linger in the ear long after the shouts and cries have faded away."

### Works in Critical Context

From the very beginning of Nkosi's writing career at the *Drum*, critics have enthusiastically praised him as one of Africa's best writers, one "whose vision of South Africa remains fiercely his own," says Michiko Kakutani. Much of his work dealing with African literature and cultural concerns is commended by academics who analyze his writing from such social perspectives. Furthermore, Nkosi is highly respected as a literary scholar himself.

**Mating Birds** *Mating Birds*, Nkosi's first novel, immediately gained widespread critical attention. Through the story of Ndi Sibiya, a young man attracted to Veronica, a white woman, Nkosi explores miscegenation. Although the rules of apartheid prevent Sibiya and Veronica from speaking to one another, they carry on a silent flirtation, Sibiya growing more obsessed with her every day. Eventually, he follows her home, and Veronica seduces him. However, when their relationship is discovered, Veronica accuses Sibiya of rape, a claim that leads to his arrest and probable execution.

Critics unanimously recognize *Mating Birds* as a comment on South Africa's system of apartheid—and acknowledge Nkosi's courage in writing such a public political condemnation of South Africa's racial intolerance. George Packer, for instance, observes, "*Mating Birds* feels like the work of a superb critic. Heavy with symbolism, analytical rather than dramatic, it attempts nothing less than an allegory of colonialism and apartheid, one that dares to linger in complexity." Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that *Mating Birds* "confronts boldly and imaginatively the strange interplay of bondage, desire and torture inherent

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Nkosi's famous contemporaries include:

**Nathan M. Pusey** (1907–2001): As the president of Harvard University from 1954 to 1971, Pusey led the largest fundraising campaign in the history of higher education in America.

**Jack Kerouac** (1922–1969): A leading figure of the Beat Generation, Kerouac was the author of *On the Road*, an autobiographical novel that gave voice to the young, dissatisfied generation of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

**Kwame Nkrumah** (1909–1972): Nkrumah was the first president of Ghana when it gained its independence in 1957.

**Joseph Brodsky** (1940–1996): Winner of the 1987 Nobel Prize in Literature, Brodsky was an exiled Russian poet who became an American citizen in 1977.

**Toni Morrison** (1931–): Known for its epic themes and vivid dialogue, Morrison's fiction explores the roles of black women in a racist, male-dominated society.

**Dario Fo** (1926–): An Italian playwright, director, and actor, Fo's dramatic work incorporates elements from ancient Italian comedies.

in interracial sexual relationships within the South African prison house of apartheid."

Other commentators, however, have attacked the novel's ambiguous depiction of rape. "Nkosi's handling of the sexual themes complicates the distribution of our sympathies, which he means to be unequivocally with the accused man," notes Rob Nixon. For some, even the question of whether Sibiya committed a crime at all remains unclear, which causes problems for the reader, as "we are never certain who did what to whom or why," says Gates. Sibiya himself is unsure: "But how could I make the judges or anyone else believe me when I no longer knew what to believe myself? . . . Had I raped the girl or not?" Gates responds, "We cannot say. Accordingly, this novel's great literary achievement—its vivid depiction of obsession—leads inevitably to its great flaw."

While many critics praise Nkosi's portrayal of Sibiya's feelings for Veronica, scholars including Sara Maitland object to Nkosi's depiction of the white woman. Says Maitland, "Surely there must be another way for Nkosi's commitment, passion and beautiful writing to describe the violence and injustice of how things are than this stock image of the pale evil seductress, the eternally corrupting female?" Nixon agrees that in refuting the conception of the black man as a sexual predator, "Nkosi edges unnecessarily close to reinforcing the myth of the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Miscegenation, or the intimate relations between a man and woman of different races, is the focus of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi's most famous novel. Listed below are other works that deal with miscegenation and its consequences:

*The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), a novel by James Fenimore Cooper. In this novel about race and the problems associated with overcoming racial divisions during the French and Indian War, Cooper suggests that interracial relations are dangerous, yet strangely desirable.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), a novel by Harper Lee. Compassionate, humorous, and moving, this novel deals with serious issues of racial inequality and rape in 1930s America.

*God's Stepchildren* (1924), a novel by South African writer Sarah Gertrude Millin. The plot of this novel presents racial mixing as a new kind of original sin.

raped woman as someone who deep down was asking for it." Despite such negative commentary regarding sexual relations, however, reviewer Alan Ryan writes, *Mating Birds* is very possibly the finest novel by a South African, black or white, about the terrible distortion of love in South Africa since Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope*.

### Responses to Literature

1. Read one of Nkosi's novels. Write an essay in which you explore three different instances in the text that reveal Nkosi's longing for his South African life.
2. With another classmate, research the etymology of the word "miscegenation." Then, discuss what kind of role this term plays in South African history and culture. What kind of role does this term play in Nkosi's work? What are the similarities and differences between miscegenation and taboo?
3. Nkosi is a highly respected literature professor. Assume the persona of Nkosi and write a course outline/syllabus for a semester-long class on the history of African literature during the 1900s. Include works by specific writers that your students will read. In order to complete this assignment, you will need to study examples of syllabi you can find on the Internet, as well as research major twentieth-century African writers and literary movements during this time period.

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## ■ Nevil Shute Norway

SEE Nevil Shute

## ■ Silvina Ocampo

BORN: 1903, Buenos Aires, Argentina

DIED: 1993, Buenos Aires, Argentina

NATIONALITY: Argentine

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Book of Fantasy* (1940)

*Extraordinary Tales* (1955)

*Leopoldina's Dream* (1988)

### Overview

Although not well known outside her homeland, Silvina Ocampo was a highly regarded artist, poet, and short-story writer in her native Argentina. In general, English-speaking readers are most familiar with her collaborations with husband Adolfo Bioy Casares, an Argentine novelist, as well as with Argentine poet and short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges. She and Borges worked as editors on *The Book of Fantasy*, an anthology of fantastic tales that exemplify the magic realism evident in modern Latin American fiction. In those short stories written independently by Ocampo, the probable and the improbable are fused so effortlessly that readers are challenged to question what they think they know about the world and their place in it.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Artistic Pursuits in Paris and Buenos Aires**  
Born in 1903 to a privileged family in Buenos Aires, Ocampo was the youngest of six daughters, including Victoria Ocampo, editor of the highly respected *Sur* magazine. Because of her family's social position, Ocampo received an education in both European and Argentine culture and early on lived in Paris, where she studied painting. In 1934, she met fellow Argentine writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, an association that helped her establish a reputation among Argentine literary circles.

An artist as well as a writer, Ocampo published drawings based on the early poems of Jorge Luis Borges, the renowned poet and short-story writer who remained Ocampo's lifelong friend, before publishing *Forgotten Travel*, her first collection of short stories, in 1937. In 1940, the same year she debuted her paintings in Buenos Aires, Ocampo married Bioy Casares, and the couple began hosting a weekly open house for Borges and other writers, including Chilean novelist María Luisa Bombal and Argentine poet Ezequiel Martínez Estrada.

**An Artist in Argentina** In 1946, the military-led government of Argentina came under the control of Juan Perón, a leader beloved by many lower-class Argentines but viewed as an anti-intellectual dictator by those skeptical of his policies. This turmoil continued throughout Ocampo's life, with Perón and his cohorts returning to power frequently; democracy finally returned to Argentina in 1983, and efforts were made to foster improved relations between the government and the country's creative communities. Unlike some artists, Ocampo worked relatively free from the pressures of government hostility.

Although Ocampo's second collection of short stories did not appear until eleven years after her first, those years were not idle ones for the writer. Ocampo collaborated with Bioy Casares and Borges on two anthologies, *The Book of Fantasy*, a collection of fantastical stories published in 1940, and *Anthology of Argentine Poetry*, published in 1941. At the same time, Ocampo worked with her two partners, and she published her own stories, paintings, and poetry, producing a substantial body of work throughout her lifetime. Among several other national literary awards, Ocampo received the National Prize for Poetry in 1962. In December 1993, Ocampo died in Buenos Aires.

## Works in Literary Context

As an illustrator of Borges's poetry and his collaborator on *The Book of Fantasy* as well, Ocampo was inspired by Borges throughout her writing and artistic career. Borges himself referred to Ocampo as one of the greatest Spanish poets of all time. In regard to her fiction—which draws

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Ocampo's famous contemporaries include:

**Flannery O'Connor** (1925–1964): O'Connor's short stories combine realism with monstrous situations, and violence strikes seemingly without reason.

**Mother Teresa** (1910–1997): Mother Teresa founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity in 1950 to help sick people in India who would otherwise have died on the streets.

**George Orwell** (1903–1950): Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* address social conditions and totalitarian political systems.

**Frida Kahlo** (1907–1954): With their combination of personal symbolism and surrealism, Kahlo's paintings are classified by many as magic realism.

**Juan Domingo Perón** (1895–1974): President of Argentina from 1946 to 1955 and 1973 to 1974, Perón led a new political group backed by the most neglected factions of the agricultural and working classes.

**Stephen Spender** (1909–1995): Believing poets need to be politically engaged, Spender joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, though he later renounced that affiliation in *The God That Failed*.

**Salvatore Quasimodo** (1901–1968): The work of this Italian poet is personal, nonpolitical, and filled with striking imagery.

from myth, fairy tale, and popular romances—Borges, writing in the preface to *Leopoldina's Dream*, points out the paradox within: “[Her short fictions have] a strange taste for a certain kind of innocent and oblique cruelty.”

Indeed, much of Ocampo's fiction draws its energy and power from this paradox, along with her refusal to solve it. Ocampo's style, the very way she uses words and sentences, conveys something both innocent and cruel. She writes in a voice that is purposely sporadic and free of literary devices, almost as if the narrators were not accustomed to expressing themselves. As a result of gaps between sentences, the reader senses that something is missing, that something is not being told, perhaps the very something that would help give sense and order to events or help explain why the characters do what they do. That order or explanation, however, is never to come, as Ocampo's stories typically end ambiguously, requiring readers to draw their own conclusions about the fate of the characters.

**Cruel Children** In Ocampo's short stories, the cruellest characters are often children who narrate or participate in brutal acts, though whether they are aware of what they are doing is unclear. Sometimes, the children

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The author of stories suffused with surreal, mystical elements, Silvina Ocampo was a key figure in the conception of magic realism that led to the Latin American boom of the 1960s. Listed below are other works of magic realism:

*One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), a novel by Gabriel García Márquez. The epitome of Latin American boom literature, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* reflects reality and fantasy from multiple perspectives.

*The Famished Road* (1993), a novel by Ben Okri. In this book, Azaro is a spirit child who lives in the real world yet remains tied to the supernatural realm by visions of demons and witches.

*Kingdom of This World* (1949), a novel by Alejo Carpentier. Amid an atmosphere in which elements of the fantastic appear without seeming unnatural, Carpentier's work portrays the contradictions between political reality and mythical belief.

have magical or supernatural powers. For instance, in "The Velvet Dress," a story narrated by a little girl who accompanies a seamstress to the home of an arrogant wealthy woman, Ocampo vaguely hints that the story's tragedy is either predicted by or caused by the girl. A story more disturbing in its depiction of cruelty by a child is "The Prayer." In this work, a woman who hates her husband witnesses two young boys fighting over a kite. One of the boys pushes the other's face into a ditch filled with water and holds him there until he drowns. Swept by the emotion of watching "a crime in the midst of games that looked so innocent," she wants to protect the boy, so she takes the murderous child into her home. The boy quickly comes to despise the woman's husband, who insists on disciplining him. Then she leaves the boy and her husband alone in the house while she goes to church, where she thinks, "I don't know why I am afraid that something has happened in my house." Whether a crime is committed is never revealed. What is certain, however, is that the boy has demonstrated a propensity for cruelty.

### Works in Critical Context

Borges was one of the first to praise his colleague: "Silvina Ocampo is one of our best writers. Her stories have no equal in our literature." Nevertheless, she has remained an obscure literary figure. Some critics regard Ocampo as overshadowed by the more famous members of her literary circle and, therefore, underrated. Other scholars have offered the possibility that Ocampo's relative obscurity during her lifetime may have been a result

of her unwillingness to be touched by fame, preferring, instead, the dark depths of her fantasy worlds. According to the *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, Ocampo has said, "What matters is what we write: that is what we are, not some puppet made up by those who talk and enclose us in a prison so different from our dream."

***The Book of Fantasy*** In *The Book of Fantasy*, Ocampo, Bioy Casares, and Borges combined their creative intelligence to compile what they judged to be the best stories from fantastic literature. In addition to stories by Edgar Allan Poe, Saki, Ray Bradbury, and Julio Cortázar, the collection, according to Laurence Coven in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, "provides a woodshed of tales, parables and fragments to rekindle the fire of our imagination." Appearing in English more than forty years after its original Spanish edition, the volume provides an early look at the fantastic element evident in many of the works of Latin American writers in recent years. Scholar Alberto Manguel comments on the importance of *The Book of Fantasy* in literary history: "The *Antología* was an extraordinary success, not as much in the actual number of copies sold... but in the influence it had on its select public. It provided readers with a guide to realms that had until then belonged to either campfire talks or to the psychological novel, and it showed to writers vast areas of fiction that demanded neither the journalistic constraints of Sinclair Lewis nor the fancies of children's fairy tales."

### Responses to Literature

1. Ocampo, Borges, and Bioy Casares selected almost eighty pieces for *The Book of Fantasy*. Consider the fact that they were choosing stories for a collection of magic and fantasy. With a group of your classmates, discuss what criteria they might have used in their selection process. If you were compiling short stories for an anthology of American sports stories, what criteria would you use to determine which works to include?
2. Research the career of Silvina Ocampo's sister, Victoria Ocampo, who was an editor for the famous magazine *Sur*. Based on what you learn about Victoria's career, determine to what extent, if at all, Silvina's career was affected by her sister. Write a paragraph about whether you think Silvina's obscurity during her lifetime could be a result of her sister's success.
3. Ocampo often drew sketches to accompany not only her own poetry, but also that of other Argentine writers. Think about how her artistic talents could enhance her poetry, as well as how her poetic talent could enhance her art. With another classmate, research other writers who illustrated their own works. What were their motivations for doing so? Report your findings to the class.

4. Write a paragraph about what you think happens to the woman's husband in "The Prayer" when she leaves him alone with a murderous child. Is she really unaware of what the boy is going to do to her husband? Would she or the child be guilty if a crime is committed? How does the title of the story relate to the woman?

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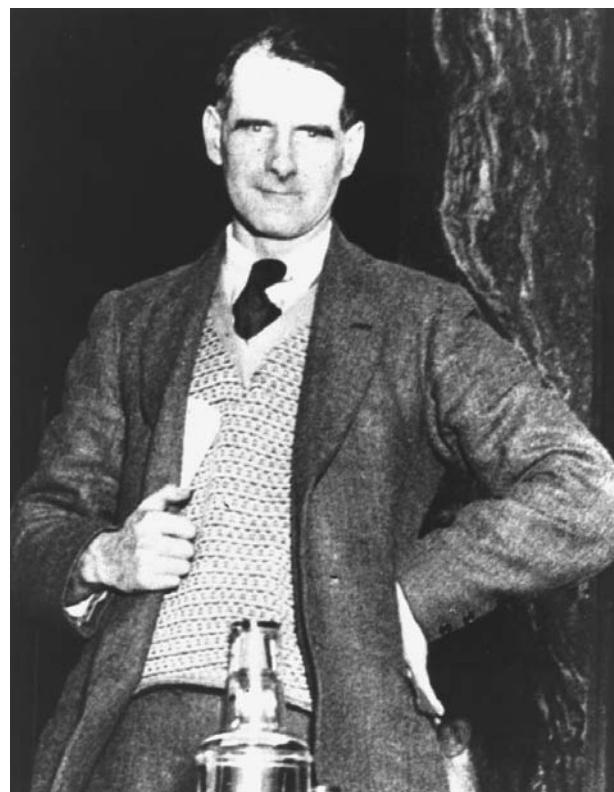
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## Sean O'Casey

BORN: 1880, Dublin, Ireland  
 DIED: 1964, Torquay, England  
 NATIONALITY: Irish  
 GENRE: Drama  
 MAJOR WORKS:  
*The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923)  
*Juno and the Paycock* (1924)  
*The Plough and the Stars* (1924)  
*The Silver Tassie* (1929)  
*Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949)

### Overview

One of the key dramatists of the early twentieth century, O'Casey was a prolific writer whose work displays a wide range of style and a willingness to experiment with form, language, and theme. A fervent advocate of the Irish



Sean O'Casey O'Casey, Sean, photograph. AP Images.

labor movement, O'Casey rose to both prominence and controversy with his "Dublin Trilogy," a series of plays focusing on the effects of the revolutionary struggle on the Dublin working class. Although he exiled himself to London in the midst of his career, his subject matter remains almost exclusively Irish.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**From Child of the Dublin Slums to Labor Leader**  
 Sean O'Casey was born in 1880 in a slum neighborhood of Dublin, an area that in those days was as well known for its wretched conditions as for its colorful characters and speech. The importance of this locale for O'Casey should not be underestimated. Working as a common laborer, he became involved with the Irish nationalist movement, joining the Gaelic League, learning to speak, read, and write fluent Irish, and Gaelicizing his name from John Casey to Sean O'Cathasaigh, under which his writings of that time were published. The Gaelicizing of one's name was and, to some extent, remains a symbol of resistance to British colonialism in Ireland and, indeed, O'Casey (as his name is most frequently rendered) soon became involved with the Irish struggle for freedom, joining the Irish Republican Brotherhood, an underground group devoted to ending British rule. At the

age of thirty, O'Casey began to devote his energies to the Irish labor movement headed by Jim Larkin, helping to fight the appalling living and working conditions of his fellow workers. He served under Larkin as the first secretary of the Irish Citizen Army, wrote articles for the labor union's newspaper, and helped organize a transport strike in 1913. He resigned his post, however, in 1914 when he was unable to prevent a rival group, the Irish Volunteers, from weakening the labor union. O'Casey viewed this group's rebellion (alongside his own Irish Citizen Army) of 1916—the Easter Rising, which declared Ireland an independent republic and for which the leaders were executed—as “a great mistake,” seeing it as having robbed Ireland of its potential leadership. That leadership would be needed when, in 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty ended the several years of guerilla fighting that had been initiated by the Easter Rising, formally establishing an independent state of Ireland (and a still England-dependent state of Northern Ireland). Though distancing himself from the Irish Citizen Army, O'Casey continued to work as a journalist throughout this period.

**A Journalist Turns to Drama, Questions “The Cause”** In his midthirties O'Casey moved away from journalism and returned to a still earlier interest in drama. He had begun writing plays in 1918, submitting them to the Abbey Theatre, which was under the leadership of poet-dramatist William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory. Those early plays were primarily naturalistic in theme and style, emphasizing the grimness and savagery of everyday life. It was not until 1923 that *The Shadow of a Gunman*, his fifth play, was accepted for production. *Shadow* is the tragedy of a poet and a peddler who becomes inadvertently involved in the guerrilla warfare of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1920s Dublin; it was to become the first part of O'Casey's “Dublin Trilogy.” His next play, *Juno and the Paycock*, studied the effects of Dublin's 1922 postwar disturbances—in large part a response of disgruntled IRA members to a peace with England that had left Northern Ireland under British rule—on a tenement family. Soon after *Juno* was completed, O'Casey began work on the last play in the trilogy, a drama focusing on the 1916 Easter week uprising itself. Named for the symbols of the Irish Citizen Army's flag, *The Plough and the Stars* was a product of O'Casey's disillusionment with nationalist politics. At its fourth performance at the Abbey, a riot broke out in the audience, partly because of the appearance of a prostitute in the second act, but primarily due to O'Casey's unsympathetic treatment of the Republican cause. “For O'Casey,” writes critic Julius Novick, “the essential reality of war, revolutionary or otherwise, no matter how splendid the principle for which it is fought, is pain, and pain dominates the last half of *The Plough and the Stars*: fear, madness, miscarriage, and death. No wonder the Nationalists rioted when the play was new; they did not want to see the seamy side of their glorious struggle.”

### *A Relocation to London: Abandoning Ireland?*

In 1926 O'Casey traveled to London to receive the Hawthornden Prize for *Juno and the Paycock* and decided to remain there with his new wife, Englishwoman Eileen Carey Reynolds. His next play, *The Silver Tassie* (1929), was the first he wrote outside his native land. Set in the Dublin slums, it studies the gruesome effects of the First World War. Critics had already noted O'Casey's growing impatience with naturalism throughout his earlier work, and in the second act of *The Silver Tassie* he rejected stage naturalism altogether in favor of a more expressionistic style. Set behind the British front line, Act II used a combination of Cockney and Dublin soldiers, a mixture of realistic speech and stylized plainsong chant, and several other expressionistic techniques. The Abbey—Ireland's premier drama stage—refused to produce the play, and Yeats's public criticism of the play—calling it unconvincing and technically inferior—did tremendous damage to O'Casey's reputation. The ensuing feud between the two lasted nearly seven years, until the drama was finally produced at the Abbey in 1935. By that time, O'Casey had severed all ties with the Abbey, leaving him without a theater workshop. His increasingly experimental dramas never received the preproduction treatment they needed, and commentators were frequently critical of his later work. Although he had begun experimenting with expressionistic techniques early in his career, it was not until *Within the Gates* (1933) that O'Casey created an entirely stylized piece. Throughout his later work O'Casey continued experimenting with both form and style, producing a number of plays (usually tragicomedies) that, according to Joan Templeton, often promoted the idea that “merriment and joy are the primary virtues in a world that has denounced them for too long.” The better known of those later works include *Purple Dust* (1942), *Red Roses for Me* (1943), and *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949). These later works were, of course, written under the shadow of World War II, which gripped Europe and the world from 1939 through 1945, and they thus are attempts to trace out a way of being in a world that has been shattered. They never achieved the same critical success as O'Casey's earlier pieces, however.

In 1939, O'Casey had published the first book of his six-volume, partly fictional autobiography, each volume of which would cover about twelve years. He also began writing drama criticism for the journal *Time and Tide* around the same time, later claiming that he was “altogether too vehement to be a good critic.” Alongside the plays just mentioned, and several studies of common life in Ireland, the remainder of his creative life would be devoted to his autobiography, *Mirror in My House* and to criticism, until his death of a heart attack in Torquay, England, in 1964.

### **Works in Literary Context**

For all the spontaneous gusto that characterized his writings, O'Casey was a deliberate and painstaking craftsman

in the making of plays for stage performance, continually exploring the resources of the modern theater and seeking to expand the range and depth of the drama. He was also a literary artist—throughout a long career, he took his work seriously, searching for the right words in the right order and for the most effective means of organizing material. He was a poet by method as well as by nature, making extraordinary efforts over minor details, writing and rewriting many drafts of each play. His literary discrimination and self-criticism are plainly evident in his working methods, as shown by the successive manuscripts and typescript drafts of the plays among the papers that he left to his wife on his death.

**Social Commentary** O'Casey was seldom content with social criticism or satire of things as they are: His imagination continually reached beyond—to things as they might be. Envisaging a future in which men and women will have more time and energy for leisure activities, he contemplated a new folk culture involving music, song, and dance, and attempted to realize something of this experience in his own work. The result is meant to have theatrical validity in its own right and is also intended as a yardstick by which the present—as portrayed in the plays—may be judged and found wanting. His preoccupations in this respect anticipated a good deal of modern literature and drama, particularly the plays of Arnold Wesker and John Arden. It is surprising that a number of theater critics who find such younger playwrights of interest because their work reflects contemporary concerns should often ignore the influence of O'Casey. At the same time, it may be contended that his dramatic practice looks backward as well as forward. His last plays, for example, are comparable to Shakespeare's: in theme they explore the conflict between the generations and between past and present values, and, in technique, they display a similar interest in the creation of a more diversified form of stage play.

Politically, though O'Casey's plays may be loosely equated with the drama of social protest or left-wing commitment, moral and aesthetic attitudes are always as important political points. Although he experienced many horrors and disappointments throughout a long and active life, the dominant impression put forward by the Irishman's writings is of an expansive vision and optimism in regard to mankind, science, and the future. As such, his true affinities are with Walt Whitman, whom he admired, rather than with, say, contemporaries Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett.

### Works in Critical Context

O'Casey was a prolific writer whose published work reveals a wide range of subject matters and styles. Critics of his time first appreciated his nationalism and then decried his skepticism toward the results of that nationalism. Since then, readers have focused not only on his early Dublin Trilogy, but also on his cogent emotional responses to World War II and his keen studies of common life in Ireland.

**The Dublin Trilogy and Beyond** Critic Kevin Sullivan has remarked that "O'Casey's reputation for genius

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

O'Casey's famous contemporaries include:

**Alfred Hitchcock** (1899–1980): One of the most popular and recognizable film directors of the twentieth century, Hitchcock displayed his mastery of the suspense genre in such works as *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Vertigo*, and *Rear Window*.

**Eugene O'Neill** (1888–1953): Awarded the Nobel Prize for his plays, O'Neill was the first playwright to introduce American audiences to the techniques of realism pioneered by artists such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov.

**Fritz Lang** (1890–1976): This innovative filmmaker was born in Austria but worked in the United States, successfully making the transition from silent to sound motion pictures. His expressive films often deal with the psychology of crime and death, and they set a high standard for the emotional depth and artistic potential for early cinema.

**William Butler Yeats** (1865–1939): An Irish poet and dramatist who won the Nobel Prize in 1923, Yeats was the driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival, and later served two terms as a senator in the Irish Senate, or Seanad Éireann.

**Helen Keller** (1880–1968): World famous for her triumphs over her disabilities, Keller went on to become an active and influential speaker and activist for progressive causes such as workers' and women's rights and anti-war movements.

**H. L. Mencken** (1880–1956): Journalist, essayist, satirist, and critic of American culture, Mencken delighted his readers with his witty barbs. He became nationally famous for his coverage of the Scopes trial (a legal case that pitted Darwinism and evolution theory versus creationism), which he dubbed the "Monkey Trial."

begins, and I think ends," with his first three plays. He proceeds to explain that this belief "is the commonly accepted critical judgment on O'Casey which only his most fervent admirers ... would care to dispute." In Robert Hogan's critical view, the negative reception of O'Casey's later plays may be attributed to most critics' unquestioning acceptance of the belief that "when O'Casey left for England, he left his talent behind on the North Circular Road." Yet Hogan himself has argued that "you can only prove the worth of a play by playing it," and having staged or performed in five of O'Casey's later plays, he asserts that "most of O'Casey's late work is eminently, dazzlingly good."

**Legacy** O'Casey's style and technique, constantly adapted and modified to present historically relevant

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

O'Casey's plays became increasingly expressionistic as he grew older. Other examples of expressionistic plays include:

*Murderer, The Hope of Women* (1909), a drama by Oskar Kokoschka. Often called the first expressionist play, this brief work features simplified, almost mythical characters, and the declamatory dialogue that would come to characterize the expressionist movement.

*The Hairy Ape* (1922), a play by Eugene O'Neill. One of several expressionist plays written by O'Neill in the 1920s, this play follows the plight of a working-class man adrift in Manhattan, and condemns both rich capitalists and socialist labor organizers. In the end, the man can only find solace with a gorilla at the zoo.

*A Dream Play* (1907), a drama by August Strindberg. A precursor to both expressionism and surrealism, this play has been successfully revived many times. Strindberg was in the process of breaking from his earlier naturalist approach when he wrote this dream tale of the daughter of the goddess Indra descending to Earth to meet a variety of symbolic characters.

themes in new and theatrically exciting ways, may often be uneven in quality, but there is a continual striving for variety and originality. The importance of such formal experimentation and the reasons for its critical neglect were succinctly expressed in the playwright's obituary in the *London Times* on, September 21, 1964:

There was a time when the general public eagerly expected him to go on working indefinitely in the style of his famous Dublin trilogy.... He insisted on his right as an artist to develop in his own way. Neither politically nor stylistically were the developments in his middle period popular. The consequence was that when he had mellowed politically and critics were in a position to appreciate that his real preoccupation as a dramatist had not been with the destruction of society but with the destruction of dramatic realism it was too late. O'Casey could no longer count on getting the plays he continued to publish adequately performed, if at all.

That his primary aesthetic aim was "the destruction of dramatic realism" and the creation of a more diverse and theatrically exciting form of drama now seems indisputable. To what extent he succeeded in that aim remains for future generations to determine.

### Responses to Literature

1. Summarize the focus of *Juno and the Paycock*. What do you feel accounts for its enduring popularity?

ity? Why do you think the musical adaptation flopped?

2. Describe O'Casey's role in the foundation and support of the Abbey Theater. How does his legacy compare to that of W. B. Yeats, the theater's most famous member?
3. Sean O'Casey was one of several Irish writers who helped revive interest in Irish myths and legends. Research Irish mythology, then write about why you think the old tales would have been important to Irish citizens in the early twentieth century. What legends specifically would have spoken to modern Irish revolutionaries?
4. O'Casey's play *Red Roses for Me* is set during the 1913 Dublin Lockout. Research the event and consider the literary techniques O'Casey uses to bring it into focus. In what ways does his writing—in its structure, in its diction, in its use of formal stylistic elements—evoke the spirit of that moment?

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### Christopher Okigbo

BORN: 1932, Ojoto, Nigeria

DIED: 1967, Nsukka, Nigeria

NATIONALITY: Nigerian

GENRE: Poetry

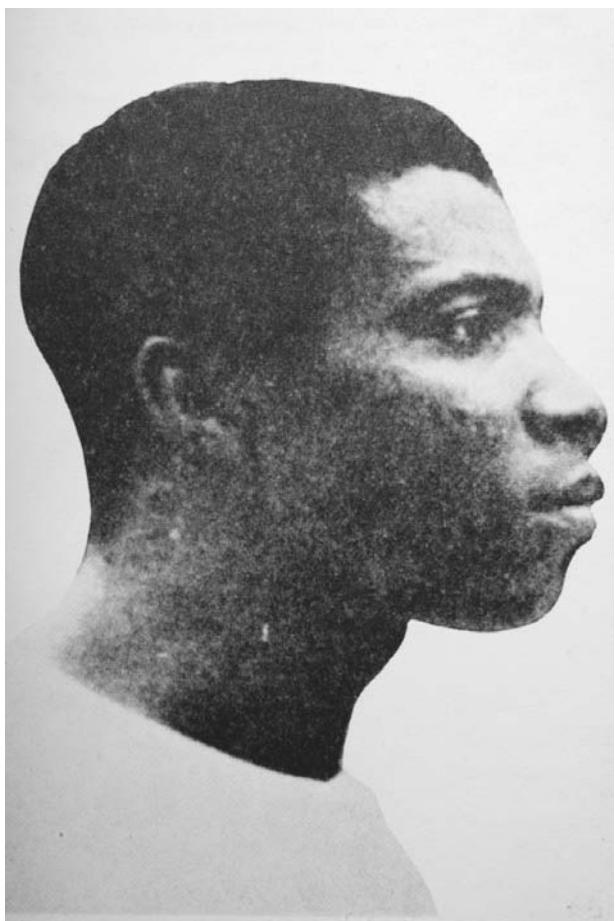
MAJOR WORKS:

*Heavensgate* (1962)

*Limits* (1962)

*Poems: Four Canzonies* (1968)

*Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder* (1971)



Christopher Okigbo Writer Pictures / drr.net

## Overview

An important transitional figure between traditional and contemporary African literature, Christopher Okigbo was one of Africa's most prominent poets writing in English. In rhythmic, musical poems, he imaginatively blends African culture and ritual with such influences as Christianity and Western poetics. With work reflecting a broad interest in the aesthetics of a variety of art forms—music, poetry, and the visual arts—Okigbo became an important figure in the international literary world. As a result, he drew attention to the postcolonial experience in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Missionary Background** Christopher Okigbo was born in Ojoto, Nigeria, on August 16, 1932, to a traveling teacher and headmaster for a local Roman Catholic mission. Okigbo's childhood was shaped by his village of Ojoto, as well as the Nigerian mission schools where he lived, and the combination of indigenous and Western views of the world was to become a central element in his

poetry. In 1936, Okigbo's family moved to Ekwulobia, where Okigbo began primary school and met the teacher he refers to as "Kepkanly" in *Heavensgate* (1962).

**Education and Teaching** In 1945, Okigbo entered Umuahia Government College and developed an interest in such Western sports as football, tennis, and boxing. From Umuahia, Okigbo gained admission to the prestigious University College, Ibadan, and graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in 1956. For the next four years, he held various jobs, including a teaching position at Fiditi Grammar School, where he encouraged the study of poetry and helped coach a few of the school's athletic teams. During this time, Okigbo wrote his first poem, "Debtors Lane," which was published in the *Horn* literary journal.

**Literary Connections** While working as a librarian at the University of Nigeria between 1960 and 1962, Okigbo, along with academics and students alike, joined Nigeria's emerging literary circles. In 1962, Okigbo resigned from his library post and became the representative for Cambridge University Press in West Africa, a position that gave him the opportunity to travel throughout the region, as well as to pursue his literary interests, which included making international literary contacts. Also in 1962, Okigbo was appointed the West African editor for the intellectual journal *Transition*, in which he published a number of his own poems.

**The Nigerian Civil War** The nation of Nigeria was established by the British after they claimed the region as a protectorate in 1901. The area had previously been claimed by a British mercantile company known as the Royal Niger Company, despite the fact that many different tribes native to the area already had their own long-standing claims within the region. Creating the new nation of Nigeria, Britain grouped these tribes together, and over the first half of the twentieth century, tensions among several of the largest ethnic groups began to grow. These problems continued even after Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960 and culminated in a civil war beginning in 1966. In 1967, a small portion of southeastern Nigeria withdrew and formed its own independent nation called Biafra. The battle to recapture Biafra as a part of Nigeria lasted for three years, and was ultimately successful—though the resulting warfare and famine cost the lives of as many as one million Africans.

**Untimely End** In 1966, the massacre and resulting exodus of eastern Nigerians prior to civil war led Okigbo to write his renowned collection of poems, *Path of Thunder: Poems Prophesying War*, which were published after his death in *Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder* (1971). When civil war eventually broke out in Nigeria, Okigbo was commissioned as a major in the Biafran army. In August of 1967, two months after the beginning of the war, Okigbo was shot and killed on the Nsukka front.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Okigbo's famous contemporaries include:

- Chinua Achebe** (1930–): Nigerian author whose novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is acknowledged as the most popular work of African literature ever written.
- Wole Soyinka** (1934–): Nigerian playwright who in 1986 became the first African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.
- Harold Pinter** (1930–): Despite its wit, lively dialogue, and depiction of humorously irrational human behavior, Pinter's drama has been called the "comedy of menace" because it always imparts a sense of threat to one's identity.
- Seamus Heaney** (1939–): This Irish poet, playwright, and critic won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995.
- Richard Wilbur** (1921–): Praised for his perfectly crafted poems, Wilbur's recollections of childhood and his observations of town life are captured as universal experience.
- Elie Wiesel** (1928–): Wiesel's poignant memoir, *Night* (1958), captures his experiences as the survivor of a Nazi concentration camp.

### Works in Literary Context

During his short lifetime, Okigbo published only two collections of poetry: *Heavensgate* and *Limits, Poems: Four Canzones* and *Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder* appeared posthumously. Despite Okigbo's limited number of published volumes, his work is considered a significant contribution to both African and world literature, primarily for the innovation he brought to African poetry. At a time when African verse was restricted to patriotic themes and conventional poetic methods, Okigbo's work involves complex, personal themes.

**Western Influence** Okigbo's style was influenced by Western artists, especially American expatriate poet Ezra Pound. In addition to stylistic elements and images inspired by Pound, much of Okigbo's poetry shares similarities with several other notable modernist writers, including T. S. Eliot. Scholars have linked the musicality of Okigbo's poems not only to Pound's *Cantos* (1975, posthumous), but also to pieces of such composers as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. Though Okigbo participated in the tradition of Western literature, he also adapted its devices and symbolism to explore African identity. This blending of Western ideas and techniques with a Nigerian perspective has distinguished Okigbo's work from that of his contemporaries.

**Musicality** Okigbo is perhaps best remembered for the distinct musical style of his verse. Recommending

that readers listen to Okigbo's poems in order to appreciate them fully, scholar Paul Theroux observes that "looking is confusion: what we see in the poem may be an impenetrable mystery, and there are words and phrases in Okigbo's poetry that are nearly impossible to figure out. Listening is simpler and more rewarding; there is music in [his] poetry." Artistically stimulated by Okigbo, many African poets have imitated his practice of infusing poetry with rhythm and song.

### Works in Critical Context

Okigbo was widely praised during his career and continues to be acknowledged as a master poet; however, his use of intricate symbolism, myth, ritual, and personal experience has evoked mixed critical reactions regarding the meaning and importance of his work. While some scholars argue that Okigbo's poetry reflects mankind's quest for divinity, others interpret it as an attack on Christianity. Still others maintain that Okigbo's poetry is a vehicle for his political and social views, especially the poems that delve into the cultural and political alienation of Nigeria during the colonial period.

**Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder** A few critics have claimed that Okigbo was more a stylist than a poet with a message; however, several recent scholars call attention to his role as a prophet. Because of the powerful imagery and voice in *Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder*, academics have analyzed the work through this lens. Other critics have focused their investigations on the construction of *Labyrinths, with Path of Thunder*, emphasizing its reliance on musical patterns in both sound and phrase. For example, in an article titled "From Pre-history to Post-history: Revisiting the Poetry of Christopher Okigbo, the Prophet of the New African Renaissance," Catherine Acholonu comments that the "musicality of language, the recurrent patterns and variations upon the same theme, the accumulating images of infrastructure and dramatized experience function as carriers of the poet's vision. Through music, the poet attains a state of abstraction in his pursuit of the artistic ideal of purity, of the perfect identification of matter with form."

Many critics have contemplated how Okigbo's verse might have developed if he had not died at such a young age. In light of Okigbo's short life and prophetic vision, Chukwuma Azuonye comments in "Christopher Okigbo: The Road Not Taken," "*Path of Thunder* is not a fulfillment but a promise of the revolutionary direction of the unrealized future of Okigbo's poetry. Had he survived to realize that future, it is conceivable that he would have shed the remnants of obscurity in imagery and allusion, which, despite his new poetic manifesto, can be found still lingering in this essentially transitional piece." *Path of Thunder* scholar Sunday O. Anozie declares, "Nothing can be more tragic to the world of African poetry in English than the death of Christopher Okigbo, especially at a time when he was beginning to

show maturity and coherence in his vision of art, life and society, and greater sophistication in poetic form and phraseology. Nevertheless his output, so rich and severe within so short a life, is sure to place him among the best and the greatest of our time."

## Responses to Literature

1. A year before the Nigerian civil war in which Okigbo lost his life, he wrote a volume of poetry prophesying the war; Okigbo's "Come Thunder" has been compared to "The Second Coming" by W. B. Yeats. Read these two poems, as well as the backgrounds of the wars each poet anticipated. Make a list of portents in each poem. Do you believe each work contains enough evidence for critics to say the writers were able to predict war?
2. At the onset of the Biafran war in Nigeria, Okigbo decided that it would not be enough to write about the war, so he joined the army and died fighting on the front lines. Many of his fellow Nigerian writers survived the conflict and went on to long and illustrious careers. In your opinion, did Okigbo better serve his cause by fighting, or would he have proven himself more effective by staying alive and continuing to write?
3. In a book by Ali Mazrui titled *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), Okigbo is put on trial in heaven, where he must defend his decision to give up his art in order to go to war. Why would Mazrui write such a book? Assume the voice of Okigbo and write a one-page essay in your defense.
4. In a speech on the Web site Panafrican.org, scholar Alex I. Ekwueme states: "There is some of Okigbo's poetry that I understand at first reading and some I do not understand at all; some that I did not understand at first reading but which made some sense later; and some that appear to make different senses at different readings. But whatever be the case, be the lines clear or obscure, they make enjoyable and inspiring reading—especially aloud." How can writing that is beyond comprehension be valued as literary? Is a poem effective if it can be enjoyed only for its musicality and cadence when read aloud? What criteria concerning art, its form, and its vision would you establish for it to be considered worthwhile or important?

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rich with mythological imagery and archetypal symbolism, Okigbo's verse explores the human pursuit of divinity. Indeed, many scholars believe that Okigbo's poetry is an account of his inner struggle to reconcile the concepts of two different faiths, Christianity and his native religion. Mankind's spiritual quest for the divine has been a recurrent theme in the literary traditions of all cultures, including in the following works:

*The Creation of Adam* (1508–1512), a fresco painted by Michelangelo. The focal point of this inspirational piece on the Sistine Chapel ceiling is the near contact between the fingers of Adam and God.

*The Divine Comedy* (1321), a poem by Dante Alighieri. This long narrative poem traces a man's journey from darkness into divine light, or God.

*Women in Praise of the Sacred* (1994), a poetry anthology edited by Jane Hirshfield. From Enheduanna of ancient Sumeria to American lyric poet Emily Dickinson to Subok of Korea, this collection of poetry explores and celebrates women's spirituality.

*Mathematics and the Divine: A Historical Study* (2004), a nonfiction book edited by Teun Koetsier and Luc Bergmans. The purpose of this work is to show that throughout history and across cultures, mathematics and theology are intimately related.

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## Ben Okri

BORN: 1959, Minna, Nigeria

NATIONALITY: Nigerian

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

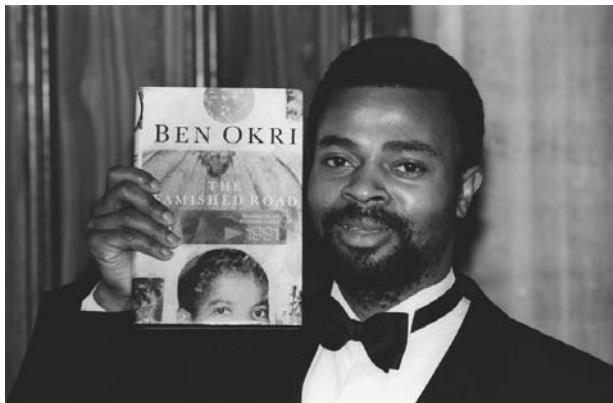
MAJOR WORKS:

*Flowers and Shadows* (1980)

*The Landscapes Within* (1981)

*The Famished Road* (1991)

*Songs of Enchantment* (1993)



Ben Okri *Okri, Ben, London, 1991, photograph.* AP Images.

## Overview

Nigerian novelist, poet, and short-story writer Ben Okri continually seeks to capture the post-independence Nigerian worldview, including the civil war and the ensuing violence and transformation, no matter how troubling or painful these events may be. He is known as an ambitious, experimental writer who seeks to abandon conventional European notions of plot and character. Among his best-known works is the novel *The Famished Road* (1991), which won the 1991 Booker Prize for Fiction.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Return to Africa** Okri was born in Minna, Nigeria, on March 15, 1959, to Silver Oghenegueke Loloje Okri, an Urhobo from near the town of Warri, on the Niger Delta, and Grace Okri, an Igbo from midwestern Nigeria. In 1961, Okri's father left for England to pursue a law degree at the Inner Temple in London. After the family had joined him some months later, the Okris settled in Peckham, in the Greater London borough of Southwark. From September 1964, Okri attended John Donne Primary School, a rough primary school in Southwark. After his father had been called to the bar in July 1965, Okri was horrified to discover that he and his mother had to return to Nigeria. He went back to Nigeria, both a stranger and an innocent, at the age of six.

The Nigeria he had been born in was as unstable as the one he returned to in the mid-1960s. In October 1960, Nigeria gained its full independence from Great Britain and became a fully independent member of the British Commonwealth. The new republic almost immediately was embroiled in internal unrest, primarily caused by the complex ethnic compositions of its regions. In early 1966, these tensions resulted in a military coup that put Major General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi in power. A

couercoup a few months later led to the murder of the general, and he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon as head of the military government. Civil war soon began between the military government and the republic, which ended in 1970 with Gowon and his military regime in control until the mid-1970s. After Gowon failed to transfer power to civilian rule as promised, he was overthrown in 1975. Political unrest continued, however.

**Immigrated to England** In this atmosphere, Okri started his first novel in 1976, at age seventeen. Armed with the manuscript of his novel, Okri left Nigeria for England in 1978 after he was denied entrance to Nigerian universities. Okri lived with his uncle in New Cross, in the inner-London borough of Lewisham, while working as staff writer and librarian for *Afroscope*, a France-based current-affairs digest, and attending evening classes in Afro-Caribbean literature at Goldsmiths College in New Cross. Awarded a Nigerian government scholarship, Okri enrolled in 1980 as an undergraduate at the University of Essex, where he later obtained a BA in comparative literature.

**Published First Novels** Okri's first novel, *Flowers and Shadows*, was published in 1980, when he was twenty-one. His second novel, *The Landscapes Within* (1981), came out the following year. They were generally ignored by critics and the book-buying public, forcing the author to live on the streets and subway stations for a time. From 1983 to 1987 Okri served as poetry editor for the London-based weekly magazine *West Africa*. Although he enjoyed the job, he was depressed by the poems submitted to the journal, which were almost exclusively about human suffering. In the end, he was fired because he was not publishing enough poetry. At the same time, Okri started to work as a freelance broadcaster for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) African Service, introducing the current affairs and features program *Network Africa*. One year later, he was awarded a bursary by the Arts Council of Great Britain that allowed him to continue work on his writing.

**Artistic Success** In 1991, Jonathan Cape published Okri's *The Famished Road*, the first in a trilogy of novels centered on the same characters. That same year, Trinity College of Cambridge University named Okri the Trinity Fellow Commoner in the Creative Arts, an award that gave him the salary of an academic and allowed him to continue his writing. The Trinity judges were much influenced by the qualities of *Stars of the New Curfew* (1986) and had the opportunity of reading *The Famished Road* in proof form.

Okri published the second volume in *The Famished Road* trilogy, titled *Songs of Enchantment*, in 1993. The third volume, *Infinite Riches*, appeared five years later. In

1997, Okri was elected vice president of the English branch of International PEN and was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He was named a member of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2001.

While winning awards, Okri continued to write challenging novels. They include *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), which was concerned with the same thematic material as the *Famished Roads* novels. In 2002, he published *Arcadia*, which diverged sharply from his previous works by focusing on Lao, an ordinary television reporter. Okri published the novel *Starbook* in 2007, and continues to live and work in London.

### Works in Literary Context

It is not surprising that critic Giles Foden sees influences as disparate as African mythology and Western science fiction in the work of Okri, given the depth and breadth of Okri's reading. He began reading the classics of the Western tradition—Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare, for example—in his early teen years. As he grew and became more concerned with Nigerian politics and society, his reading also grew. Indeed, his early work can be fruitfully compared with the novels of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka—both African novelists—and James Joyce, the acclaimed Irish author, and his later work shows the marks of the African “animist” tradition—akin to “magical realism”—in which spirits and spiritual phenomena take physical form.

**The Artist in Nigeria: The *kunstlerroman*** Okri's works frequently focus on the political, social, and economic conditions of contemporary Nigeria. In *Flowers and Shadows*, for example, Okri employs paradox and dualism to contrast the rich and poor areas of a typical Nigerian city. Set in the capital city of Lagos, the novel focuses on Jeffia, the spoiled child of a rich man, who realizes his family's wealth is the result of his father's corrupt business dealings. In *The Landscapes Within*, the central character, Omovo, is an artist who, to the consternation and displeasure of family, friends, and government officials, paints the corruption he sees in his daily life.

Detailing the growth and development of the protagonist as well as that of Nigeria, *The Landscapes Within* has been classified as a *kunstlerroman*—a novel that traces the evolution of an artist—and favorably compared with other works in the genre, notably James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). The clarity and precision of Okri's style owe something to Chinua Achebe in *The Landscapes Within*, and his vision of social squalor and human degradation is as unflinching and as compassionate as that of Wole Soyinka. Omovo is actually described at one point reading Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters* (1965), whose title points up the social significance of his own artistic dedication.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Okri's famous contemporaries include:

**Mark Z. Danielewski** (1966–): American experimental writer whose novels include *House of Leaves* (2000) and *Only Revolutions* (2006).

**Cyprian Ekwensi** (1921–2007): Nigerian author credited with popularizing the novel in Nigeria. His novels include *Jagua Nana* (1961).

**Dick Francis** (1920–): English author who has published prolifically since the early 1960s. His first book was his autobiography of his horse jockey days, *The Sport of Queens* (1957).

**David Lynch** (1946–): American filmmaker whose *Eraserhead* (1977) made him a cult hero. His later films include *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Blue Velvet* (1986).

**Benazir Bhutto** (1953–2007): Pakistani politician who was the first woman to serve as prime minister of Pakistan.

**Tony Blair** (1953–): British politician who served as prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1997 until 2007.

**Animism** *The Famished Road* tells the story of an *abiku*, a child who is born to die and return again and again in an endless cycle to plague his mother. Okri makes of this myth a parable of migrancy, transition, and metamorphosis. Having made a pact with his spirit-companions to return soon, Azaro refuses to return after birth and struggles to hold on to life despite the temptations of his companions in the spirit world.

Reviewers and critics often point to Okri's debt to magical realism and writers such as Gabriel García Márquez. One of the essential features of African animist thought is a dogged refusal to conceive of abstractions that cannot be physically represented. Ancestors, spirits, gods, and other mythical figures necessarily possess palpable physical characteristics. The animist imagination imposes no inherent radical dichotomies on the world, as Western thought has done. The animist understands not the principles of singular identity and contradictions but those of plurality and metamorphosis. The *abiku* is both human and nonhuman and moves between those states as easily as water turns to ice or steam.

The “animist realism” of *The Famished Road* makes it possible to evoke naturally, within a single narrative, simultaneous orders of existence. The motifs of the spirit boxer, the local lore surrounding the photographer, the various figures from folk beliefs who take over people's bodies or see with their eyes, and the domineering

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many fiction writers, like Okri, often take current events, couch them in their novels and short stories, and in so doing allow the ridiculousness or grotesque nature of these incidents to shine. Here are a few more works of art that utilize real-life events in order to critique them:

*The Jungle* (1906), a novel by Upton Sinclair. This social commentary on the plight of the working class uses as its basis the meatpacking industry, describing the horrifying working conditions that meatpackers must endure in the process.

*Elmer Gantry* (1926), a novel by Sinclair Lewis. This work exposes the godlessness and hypocrisy of a fictional preacher—a composite of a number of preachers Lewis met while researching the novel.

*Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novella by Joseph Conrad. Inspired by Conrad's own experiences working on the Congo River as a steamboat captain, this work describes the horrendous exploitation of native inhabitants along the Congo by a Belgian trading company.

presence of the road, all give this novel a distinctively Nigerian flavor that links it with the works of D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka and J. P. Clark. The major achievements of the author are his ability to carry his audience along and his acceptance of the major parameters of the world he creates, a world that “straddles twilights.”

### Works in Critical Context

Stressing his inclusion of African myth and folklore, emphasis on spirituality and mysticism, and focus on Nigerian society and the attendant problems associated with the country's attempts to rise above its third world status, critics have lauded Okri's writings for capturing the Nigerian worldview. Okri has additionally received praise for his use of surrealistic detail, elements of Nigerian storytelling traditions, and Western literary techniques, notably the magic realism popularized by Gabriel García Márquez. Placing Okri's works firmly within the tradition of postcolonial writing and favorably comparing them with those of such esteemed Nigerian authors as Chinua Achebe, critics cite the universal relevance of Okri's writings on political and aesthetic levels.

***The Famished Road*** Okri's novel *The Famished Road* explores the Nigerian dilemma. Charles R. Larson, writing in the *World & I*, remarked that “the power of Ben Okri's magnificent novel is that it encapsulates a critical

stage in the history of a nation... by chronicling one character's quest for freedom and individuation.” *The Famished Road*'s main character is Azaro, an *abiku* child torn between the spirit and natural world. His struggle to free himself from the spirit realm is paralleled by his father's immersion into politics to fight the oppression of the poor. The novel introduces a host of people, all of whom “blend together... to show us a world which may look to the naked eye like an unattractive ghetto, but which is as spiritually gleaming and beautiful as all the palaces in Heaven—thanks to the everyday, continuing miracle of human love,” wrote Carolyn See in the *Los Angeles Times*.

By novel's end, Azaro recognizes the similarities between the nation and the *abiku*. Each is forced to make sacrifices to reach maturity and a new state of being. This affirming ending also “allows rare access to the profuse magic that survives best in the dim forests of their spirit,” according to Rob Nixon of the *Village Voice*. Similarly, in her appraisal for the London *Observer*, Linda Grant commented, “Okri's gift is to present a world view from inside a belief system.” *Detroit Free Press* contributor John Gallagher deemed the work “a majestically difficult novel that may join the ranks of greatness.”

***Songs of Enchantment*** In *Songs of Enchantment*, Okri continues to explore the story and themes raised in *The Famished Road*. While the focus in the first book was on the efforts of Azaro's parents to keep him among the living, however, the focus in the second book is, wrote Charles R. Larson in the *Chicago Tribune*, “an equally difficult battle to restore the greater community to its earlier harmony and cohesiveness.” *Songs of Enchantment* more clearly explicates Okri's concerns with the problems visited upon Africa after decolonization. Wrote Larson, “The wonder of *Songs of Enchantment*... is that it carries on so richly the saga of nation building implying that countries that have broken the colonial yoke may face an even more difficult struggle.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *The Landscapes Within* and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, both of which are about the growth of young novelists into men. In a paper, compare Okri's description of the growth of the artist in his novel with Joyce's description of the same. How do issues like geographic location and historical context affect their representation of artists' coming of age? In your response, cite relevant passages from the novels to support your position.
2. Read *The Famished Road*. This novel includes elements of animism—in which spirits and spiritual phenomena are represented in physical objects. What effect does Okri achieve by including these

elements of animism? In other words, how do you think the novel would be changed if it did not include animism? Write a paper that outlines your response.

3. Okri uses current events to illustrate certain points he wishes to make in his fiction. These current events are often chosen because they epitomize some viewpoint or the ridiculousness of a certain action. (Think of the politician harming his potential voters by dropping heavy but worthless coins on their heads from a helicopter.) Pick a current event that you think illustrates the foibles of a particular worldview or the ridiculousness of some set of beliefs or practices. Then, try to spin a short story out of this single current event. Visit the short fiction of Okri, especially *Stars of the New Curfew*, to get an idea of how to do this effectively.
4. Using the Internet and the library, research *abiku*. In what ways does Okri deviate from traditional representations of the *abiku* in *The Famished Road*? What effect does Okri achieve by deviating from these representations? Construct your response in the form of an essay.

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## Michael Ondaatje

BORN: 1943, Colombo, Ceylon

NATIONALITY: Canadian, Sri Lankan

GENRE: Fiction, plays, poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1970)

*Coming through Slaughter* (1976)

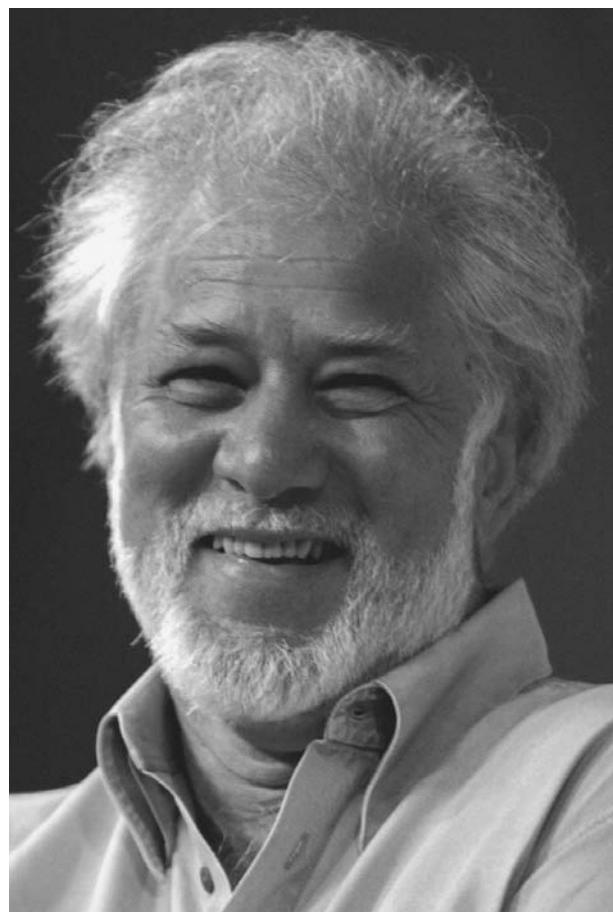
*In the Skin of a Lion* (1987)

*The English Patient* (1992)

*Anil's Ghost* (2000)

#### Overview

Best known for his novel *The English Patient* (1992), Michael Ondaatje has made several contributions to literature and film. He started his writing career as a poet in the 1960s, later attracting widespread critical acclaim by blending verse, fact, and fiction to create unique works. Besides impacting existing literary genres with everything from narrative mixing to fictional documentary, Ondaatje has contributed editing, critical analysis, and the first



Michael Ondaatje Mauricio Lima / AFP / Getty Images

book-length study of renowned poet and balladeer Leonard Cohen to his list of credentials. He continues to influence drama and film with adaptations of his poetry and prose.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**From Ceylon to London to Montreal** Born Philip Michael Ondaatje on September 12, 1943, in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), the writer began life in a class and environment that would thereafter influence his literary subjects and themes. His father, Mervyn Ondaatje, was superintendent of a tea and rubber plantation owned by Michael's wealthy grandfather, while his mother, Enid Doris Gratiaen, was a part-time performer, doing radical dance as influenced by renowned choreographer Isadora Duncan. Despite appearances, Ondaatje's childhood was less than idyllic. His father drank to excess, and before he was ten his parents' marriage had ended. As a result, Ondaatje went to London with his mother in the early 1950s, and eventually studied at Dulwich College. Finding the English educational system constricting, Ondaatje left to join his brother, already living in Montreal, Quebec, and enrolled in Bishop's University in the early 1960s.

**Early Work** He began writing poetry at Bishop's and continued his writing plans at the University of Toronto. In 1967 he earned an MA at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and was hired as an instructor at the University of Western Ontario in London. Ondaatje's first book, the poetry collection *The Dainty Monsters*, was published that same year.

**New Family Life and Subjects** As Ondaatje began his chosen occupation, he reached for the readings that would inspire him, including the works of poets Robert Browning, T. S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats, and the younger Modern poets. He came in contact with writers and poets who would influence his writing, such as poet and critic D. G. Jones. He sought out stimulating environments, such as a job on a road gang. This experience lent inspiration for *The Dainty Monsters*. His marriage to Kim Jones in 1964—which brought with it Jones's four children from a previous marriage and soon two more children of their own—made for subjects and themes that continued through his next titles, such as *Rat Jelly* (1973). Later, the pain of divorce from Jones found expression in *Secular Love* (1984).

**Making Myths and Movies** In the 1970s, Ondaatje began combining his poetry with other genres and media forms. This artistic blending would become his trademark. The 1970 *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems*, for instance, became material for radio and stage readings. After adding songs and reforming the work, the 1974 *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,

became a play performed first by the Toronto Free Theatre and later at the Brooklyn Academy in New York. It has since been performed in various countries. *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970) traces the career of the poet bp Nichol (Barrie Phillip Nichol), with whom Ondaatje shared the 1970 Governor General's Award. *Carry on Crime and Punishment* (1972) featured his family and friends as the cast.

**Making Continued Impressions** Ondaatje collected numerous awards throughout the 1970s. His 1979 collection of poetry *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* won the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1980. He followed this success with the publication of one of his most important works, *Running in the Family*. The publication of Ondaatje's 1987 *In the Skin of a Lion*, though, gave the writer his first taste of international acclaim. The hybrid novel is about a young man coming of age in Toronto during the 1920s and 1930s. Building upon the facts of a real-life incident from that time—the mysterious disappearance of a well-known millionaire—the novel is as much about the search for the missing tycoon, the hero's involvement in the potentially lucrative quest, and his ensuing mix-up in the radical politics of the era as it is about Toronto's immigrant communities and their role in building the city.

Ondaatje became a household name with the 1996 film adaptation of his 1992 novel *The English Patient*. Set in a Tuscan villa at the end of World War II, the story begins with a Canadian nurse, Hana, who readers learn is the daughter of the protagonist of *In the Skin of the Lion* and who is left almost alone in a bombed-out former convent. She has stayed behind at the former military hospital with a badly burned patient who has been brought there to pass his remaining days. Hana reads to the nameless man, gives him morphine, and ministers to his charred skin as she listens to his story. The screen version, adapted by director Anthony Minghella, won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1996. The novel version was awarded Britain's top literary honor, the Booker Prize, in 1992.

Ondaatje continues to teach contemporary literature in translation and creative writing at Glendon College as professor of Canadian and American literatures. Still a Coach House editor and coeditor of *Brick: A Literary Journal*, he continues to win awards, including another Governor General's Award for his 2006 novel *Divisadero*.

## Works in Literary Context

One of Ondaatje's earliest influences was poet and musician Leonard Cohen. He was later influenced by a wide variety of authors, including Italo Calvino, Willa Cather, and Gabriel García Márquez. He also credits Diego Rivera, Henri Rousseau, Sri Lankan temple sculpture, and

jazz music as major influences. Finally, Ondaatje has said that his family, “everyone yakking and inventing stories and gossiping,” was a “big thing” for him and a “literary influence in some odd way.”

**Blending Genres** Ondaatje’s work defies categorization into individual genres. His writing tends to blend the oral, visual, historical, narrative, and the poetic. For example, his 1976 novel, *Coming through Slaughter*, about New Orleans cornetist Buddy Bolden, contains few available facts about Bolden as well as altered dates, people brought together who never met, and polished facts “to suit the truth of fiction.” *Coming through Slaughter* also strays from chronological order and varies from historical documentation to narrative to interior monologue.

**Blending Themes** In a style characterized by wry humor, flamboyant imagery, extravagant metaphors, and sudden shifts in tone, Ondaatje’s writing is based on themes of family and social issues. In his poetry, observed critic Sam Solecki, “the fundamental or essential nature of experience is consistently being described and examined.” Likewise, in his prose, he takes on the personal task of exploring family dynamics and of giving expression to social issues he finds important, such as those he discussed in a 1987 *Quill and Quire* interview with Barbara Turner: the “gulf between rich and poor, the conditions of the labour force, racism . . . in Canada.”

### Works in Critical Context

Ondaatje’s body of work has received consistently high critical praise. *Running in the Family* (1982) was appreciated for its re-creation of a particular society and for its stylistic exploration of the relationship between history and the poetic imagination. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, widely considered Ondaatje’s most celebrated work, was praised and challenged by critics and readers for dealing with an American folk hero and outlaw. Most of his other writing continues to be revered for its “jungle-lush” aesthetic, as Douglas Barbour once noted, and its “rhythmic control over his language.”

While several of his works have earned prestigious honors, others stand out as most often read, studied, and discussed—among them *Anil’s Ghost* and *The English Patient*.

**The English Patient (1992)** The movie *The English Patient*, released in 1996 and based on the 1992 novel of the same name, won nine Academy Awards and more than forty other awards. The novel also received wide critical praise, especially for its dynamic interrelationships, dialogues, and imagery. Writer and critic Richard Ford, for example, quoted on the book’s dust jacket, called it “an exotic, consuming and richly inspired novel of passion . . . [which] in its elegance and its satisfactions . . . resembles no book I know.”

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Ondaatje’s famous contemporaries include:

**Margaret Atwood** (1939–): Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, feminist, and activist who is one of the most highly esteemed writers of Canada and of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

**Leonard Cohen** (1934–): Canadian singer-songwriter, poet, and novelist. Cohen’s songs and poetry have influenced many other writers and more than a thousand renditions of his work have been recorded.

**Ken Kesey** (1935–2001): American author best known for his debut novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). Kesey is credited as being a counterculture figure who linked the Beat generation of the 1950s with the hippies of the 1960s.

**Gloria Steinem** (1934–): Leading American feminist, journalist, and women’s rights advocate and activist who founded *Ms.* magazine in 1972.

**Anil’s Ghost (2000)** Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost* involves the war in Sri Lanka, his native land. Focusing on themes of human and civil rights, the book won the International Fiction Prize from the *Irish Times*, and wide critical acclaim. The *New York Times* review read, “Gorgeously exotic. . . . As he did in *The English Patient*, Mr. Ondaatje is able to commingle anguish and seductiveness in fierce, unexpected ways.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *The English Patient*; then consider how maps and mapmaking (cartography) represent significant moments in the memories of the characters. Identify five or six locations recalled by either Hana or the unnamed English patient and decide what each particular location suggests, represents, or means to you. Then, make a map including each of those events you came up with, creating the image/imagery you interpret as significant in each location. Be prepared to offer rationales for your choices.
2. How is the theme of nationality and nationhood expressed in the novel? Does Ondaatje think that nationality and ethnicity can be transcended? Why or why not?
3. What role does the desert play in the novel? How does the setting affect or impact or otherwise inform the themes of the story?

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Ondaatje's work frequently focuses on themes of racism, class division, and labor force conflict. Here are a few works by writers who also explore such issues:

- The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a novel by Margaret Atwood. In this dystopian novel, Canadian author Atwood speculates on a horrifying future of gender division and reproductive control under a religious totalitarian regime.
- "Harrison Bergeron" (1961), a short story by Kurt Vonnegut. In this science fiction tale, Vonnegut presents a representative family of the future: one who reflects the perfection of society and who carries the burdens of the scapegoated lesser class.
- Catfish and Mandala* (2000), a novel by Andrew X. Pham. In this autobiographical work of fiction, Pham investigates identity and the duality of the immigrant, the displacement of being a hyphenated human—both American and Vietnamese, yet neither at the same time.
- Fences* (1985), a play by August Wilson. In this play, Pulitzer Prize winner Wilson examines not only the black experience in the 1950s but race and labor issues in context.
- Native Son* (1940), a novel by Richard Wright. In this award-winning novel, Wright probes the personal and public themes of racism and explores the consequences of socialization between rich and poor and black and white.

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## Juan Carlos Onetti

BORN: 1909, Montevideo, Uruguay

DIED: 1994, Madrid, Spain

NATIONALITY: Uruguayan, Spanish

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Pit* (1930)

*A Brief Life* (1950)

*The Shipyard* (1961)

### Overview

Juan Carlos Onetti is an Uruguayan novelist and short-story writer whose works were available only in limited editions and were read by only a few of his compatriots for many years. When South American writers gained international recognition during the Latin American Boom of the 1960s, Onetti was recognized as an important voice in the development of modern Latin American literature. Along with such contemporaries as Gabriel García Márquez, Onetti contributed to the genre of magic realism with his use of innovative points of view, fantastic events, and existentialist themes.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**From Dropout to Literary Star** Juan Carlos Onetti was born on July 1, 1909, in Montevideo, Uruguay. Because his father, a customs worker, moved the family often, Onetti received a sporadic education and eventually dropped out of high school. Although he spent much of his spare time reading, he made his living by working a series of odd jobs—waiter, doorman, and grain inspector, among others—before moving to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he began writing for periodicals and the Reuters news agency in both Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Around this time, he also began writing fiction.

Concerned about government corruption and cultural materialism, Onetti openly supported progressive reforms and, returning to Montevideo, founded the influential journal *Marcha* in 1939 with a group of other intellectuals. After working as a manager at an advertising firm in Montevideo, he took a position as the director of municipal libraries in 1957, simultaneously



Juan Carlos Onetti *Onetti, Juan Carlos, photograph.* © Jerry Bauer.  
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publishing fiction expressing his social and political concerns. As his fame as an author grew, Onetti was awarded a number of literary prizes, including the Iberian-American Award from the William Faulkner Foundation in 1963.

**Exile** Onetti lived during politically unstable times in his native country. Economic hardship throughout the mid-twentieth century led to a militant group known as the Tupamaros opposing the government. This group rose to prominence when President Jorge Pacheco Areco declared a state of emergency in Uruguay in 1968, which led to an erosion of individual rights. The situation became progressively worse for Uruguayan citizens, especially after a military coup in 1973 led to an outright dictatorship instead of a democratically elected government. The regime became infamous for its use of torture and its high rate of political imprisonment.

Despite his activist ideas, Onetti avoided problems with the government until 1974, when he served as a judge for a literary contest. The judges awarded a prize to a short story that the Uruguayan government considered pornographic and subversive, and Onetti was briefly jailed before being exiled to Madrid, where he began publishing internationally acclaimed works. In 1975, he became a Spanish citizen and, in 1980, won the Cervantes Prize,

which is widely considered the most prestigious award for literature in the Spanish language. Even though Uruguay had become a democracy by the time he received the National Literary Award in 1985, Onetti refused to return to his homeland, prompting the president of Uruguay to travel to Spain to present the award. Onetti died in Spain on May 30, 1994.

## Works in Literary Context

Scholars have often cited the influence of American writer William Faulkner on Onetti's work. Indeed, Onetti's imaginary setting of Santa María, a coastal town appearing in several of his books, was inspired by Faulkner's invented Yoknapatawpha County. Even Onetti's characters have been compared with those of Faulkner, for both authors create "desperate characters without dreams but who are not lacking in humanity," says Jorge Campos in an essay in *Onetti and Others: Comparative Essays on a Major Figure in Latin American Literature*. Additional sources of inspiration for Onetti include French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline for his powerful use of language and Jorge Luis Borges for fiction that blends the fantastic with everyday life.

**Alternate Realities** In addition to social and political concerns, Onetti explores such existentialist themes as alienation, isolation, and the creation of one's own reality through fiction. Many of his novels contain characters who seek to create satisfying lives for themselves through writing, thereby escaping into their own imaginations. In *The Pit*, for example, Eladio Linacero attempts to gain satisfaction by giving meaning and order to his life through writing his memoirs; however, these recollections prove to be nothing more than stories of the fantasy life he wishes he had lived.

With the publication of *A Brief Life*, another novel in which a character escapes into his imagination, Onetti introduced the fictional town of Santa María, which would appear in several subsequent works. In *A Brief Life*, Juan Brausen, faced with financial troubles and an unhappy marriage, escapes into his conception of an ideal world, complete with two alter egos, Dr. Diaz Grey and Arce. The adventures of Brausen's fictional characters intermingle with his own everyday experiences in the real world until Dr. Grey and Arce finally break away from the control of their creator. Because the narration switches back and forth among characters, readers must decide if the narrators are telling the truth, as their stories are entirely based on subjective observations. Thus, the meaning of the story varies according to the characters' accounts of events, as well as the readers' interpretation of the stories and their trust in the characters' narrative reliability.

**Impact of the Boom** As a writer during the Latin American Boom, Onetti helped change the way the

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Onetti's famous contemporaries include:

- Saul Bellow** (1915–2005): Author whose novels deal with man's isolation, spiritual alienation, and potential for awakening.
- J. D. Salinger** (1919–): Author of *The Catcher in the Rye*, a novel about sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield's experiences in New York after being expelled from an elite private school; this book is renowned for the frankness of its first-person narration.
- Arthur Miller** (1915–2005): This American dramatist wrote many celebrated plays, including *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*.
- Richard Nixon** (1913–1994): Nixon, the thirty-seventh president of the United States (1969–1974), improved U.S. relations with the USSR and China. However, the Watergate scandal ultimately led to his resignation in disgrace.
- Walt Disney** (1901–1966): Film producer, director, screenwriter, and animator, Disney was one of the most innovative and influential figures in the world of twentieth-century entertainment.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Recurrent themes in Onetti's novels center around man's alienation and isolation, themes born from existentialism. What distinguishes Onetti from traditional existentialists, however, is that his characters attempt to create their own realities through literary production, a technique many writers have used in their own works. Listed below are examples of other works whose main characters escape reality through writing:

- The Glass Menagerie* (1944), a play by Tennessee Williams. In this play, Tom is unable to live in reality. He retreats into his own world of writing poetry, while other characters have their own methods to escape from the real world.
- Griffin & Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence* (1991), fiction by Nick Bantock. After the exchange of postcards and letters with Sabine, a fellow artist from a fictional group of South Pacific islands, Griffin concludes that Sabine is a figment of his imagination that he created out of loneliness.
- A Fast and Brutal Wing* (2004), a novel by Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson. The fantasy world of two troubled siblings is revealed through Emmet's journal entries written in a psych ward and Niki's short story about animal transformation, both of which expose conflicting details about the disappearance of a famous local writer.

world viewed Latin American culture. The boom writers achieved commercial success when their works were translated, opening them up to a much larger audience, and the major authors of this movement continued to produce best sellers for decades. The most enduring impact of the boom, however, is seen in the works of not only Latin American writers such as Isabel Allende, but also writers from around the world who credit Onetti, García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa as their inspiration.

### Works in Critical Context

After many years of being ignored by scholars, Onetti's work began to receive critical attention in the 1960s during the Latin American Boom. Nevertheless, he did not receive widespread notice until he moved to Madrid and his works were translated for an international audience. The recipient of many literary awards and honors, Onetti is considered to be an important voice in Latin American fiction.

***The Pit*** The first of Onetti's works to be approached critically was 1939's *The Pit*, which, according to M. Ian Adams, "marked a new stage in Uruguayan literature." In regard to the cultural context of *The Pit*, scholar Angel Rama comments, "From 1938 to 1940 a fracture occurs in Uruguayan culture that opens, through the course of a new interpretation of ethical and artistic values, a creative period that, after intense struggle, will control the intellectual life of the country. This fracture coincides with the rise of a generation of writers who vary between twenty and thirty years of age, who in part provoke it, and whose action is projected on the particularly disordered background of national and international life of those years." Because Onetti used such modernist techniques as stream-of-consciousness narration and inner experience—including memories, dreams, and fantasies—*The Pit* is recognized by most scholars as a work of fiction that introduced a new narrative method in Latin American literature.

***Difficult Meaning and a Tense Universe*** In 1983 Jack Murray noted that many Onetti critics, including Ivonne Bordeloirs, suggested that Onetti forced his readers to untangle the meaning of his stories; in other words, his work was not simple or direct in its delivery. Instead, Onetti often relied on symbols to get his ideas across, kept information from his readers, and purposely constructed the text in a piecemeal fashion. Yet, Murray ultimately concluded that Onetti "succeeded" with this style, even providing a "unified and coherent picture" through the fragmented construction. In 1994, following Onetti's death, Fernando Ainsa referenced the fragmentation of Onetti's fictional worlds and characters. He wrote that Onetti "establishes a formal, tense universe, a world closed existentially on itself, rigorous in style and

without concessions yet saved by the act of writing placed at the disposal of its antiheroes. Disoriented beings (when not frustrated), uprooted nonconformists, *outsiders*, and marginal figures face the difficulty of communicating with others and feel that authenticity is repressed by society.” David Butler, in 2005, echoed Ainsa’s ideas and focused an entire study on how “the body is foregrounded, fragmented, and estranged” in Onetti’s novels.

## Responses to Literature

1. Onetti served on a panel of judges that awarded a literature prize to writer Nelson Marra, whose short story was declared pornographic and offensive by the Uruguayan military dictatorship. Write an informal essay addressing the following situation: If you had been a judge with Onetti, would you have chosen Marra’s story to win the contest, even if you knew the government would object? How might the panel of judges have avoided conflict while still honoring Marra?
2. Research the Latin American Boom in literature during the 1960s. Create a poster or computer presentation that includes major writers and characteristics of the movement, along with details about what initiated the boom and how it affected literature worldwide.
3. Based on textual evidence, create a map of Santa María, Onetti’s imaginary coastal town. Use the computer program of your choice or draw the map by hand. On the back of your map, write a short advertisement inviting tourists to visit Santa María, highlighting specific areas of interest and why they are important.
4. Many of Onetti’s characters are afflicted by despair and alienation and yearn for meaning in their lives. In *The Shipyard*, for example, Larsen undertakes the restoration of a decrepit shipyard, which gives him the illusion that his life has dignity. With a group of your classmates, discuss the following: What do you feel gives a person’s life dignity? What makes an individual’s existence complete? Do you think people should ever reach a point of satisfaction?

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## George Orwell

BORN: 1903 Motihari, India

DIED: 1950 London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Novels, Essays

MAJOR WORKS:

*Burmese Days* (1934)

*Coming Up for Air* (1939)

*Animal Farm* (1945)

“Politics and the English Language” (1946)

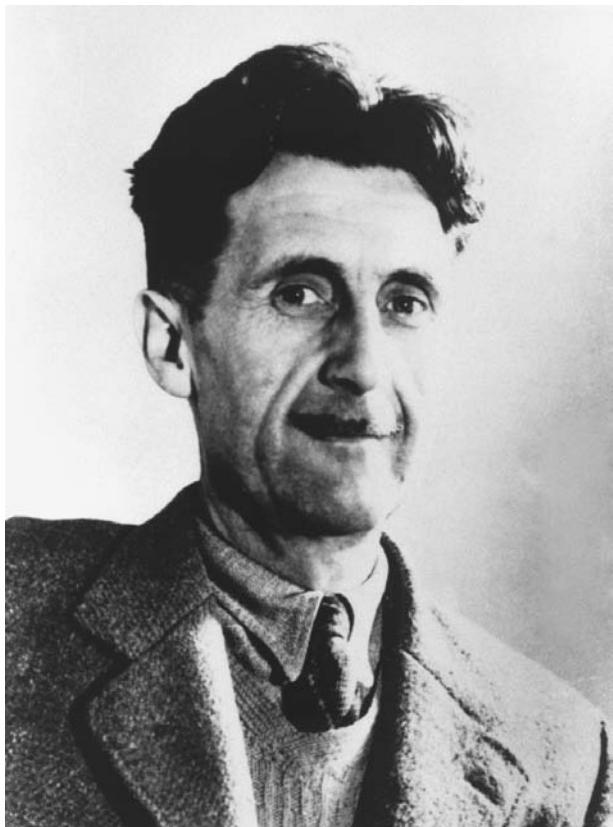
*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

## Overview

George Orwell gained an enduring international reputation with his two last works of fiction, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Although he was never primarily a writer of speculative fiction, these works have been extremely influential in the fields of fantasy and science fiction. In these works, as in the other writing that filled the rest of his career, he gauged the contemporary European scene of the troubled 1930s and 1940s with critical insight drawn from personal experience and a deep moral commitment.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, Bengal, India in 1903. At the time, India was under direct British control (it remained so until 1947). Many British government officials worked and lived there, including Orwell’s father, Richard Walmesley Blair, a minor customs official in the opium department of the Indian Civil Service. When Orwell was four years old, his family returned to England and settled at Henley, a village near London. His father soon returned to India.



George Orwell *Orwell, George, photograph. AP Images.*

When he was eight years old, he was sent to a private preparatory school in Sussex. He later claimed that his experiences there determined his views on the English class system (Orwell was a socialist who rejected the British idea of hereditary social classes). From there he went by scholarship to two private secondary schools: Wellington for one term and Eton for four-and-a-half years.

Orwell then joined the Indian Imperial Police, receiving his training in Burma (modern Myanmar, which was also at the time under British control), where he served from 1922 to 1927. While home on leave in England, he made the important decision not to return to Burma. His experiences there had given him a distaste for imperialism, and his feeling about his experiences can be seen in *Burmese Days* (1934).

**The Long Struggle to Make Writing a Career**  
Orwell attempted to establish himself as a writer—with very little success at first. He lived virtually as a tramp in London and Paris in the late 1920s, finally settling in 1929 in his parents' home in Suffolk. Still attempting to establish himself as a writer, he earned his living by teaching and by penning occasional articles, while he completed several versions of his first book, *Down and Out in London and Paris*, a recounting of his rough-and-

tumble life in the two European capitals. He was earning his living as a teacher when the book was scheduled for publication, and he preferred to publish it under a pseudonym. From a list of four possible names submitted to his publisher, he chose "George Orwell," taking the name "Orwell" from a Suffolk river.

**First Novels Spring from Early Experience**

*Orwell's Down and Out* was issued in 1933. During the next three years he supported himself by teaching, reviewing, and clerking in a bookshop and began spending longer periods away from his parents' Suffolk home. In 1934 he published *Burmese Days*, followed shortly thereafter by *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936).

In the spring of 1936 he moved to Wallington, Hertfordshire, and several months later married Eileen O'Shaughnessy, a teacher and journalist. His reputation up to this time as a writer and journalist was based mainly on his accounts of poverty and hard times, and his next book was a commission in this direction: the Left Book Club authorized him to write an inquiry into the life of the poor and unemployed. *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) was divided into two parts: the first part was a typical reporting essay, and the second part was an essay on class and socialism. It marked his birth as a political writer, an identity that lasted for the rest of his life.

**The Spanish Civil War** In July of 1936, the Spanish Civil War broke out, with the forces of the Spanish Republic on one side and the ultranationalist forces of General Francisco Franco on the other. Franco's forces prevailed by 1939, and he set himself as the country's dictator. Many foreigners, including many artists and intellectuals, spoke out in support of the Republicans, and some volunteered for military service in the Republican Army—Orwell among them. He arrived in Barcelona in 1936 and joined the militia of the POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista), serving with them in action in January 1937. Transferring to the British Independent Labour party contingent serving with the POUM militia, he was promoted first to corporal and then to lieutenant before being wounded in the middle of May. During his convalescence, the POUM was declared illegal, and he fled into France in June. His experiences in Spain caused him to become disillusioned with the leftist philosophy associated with the Soviet Union, but inspired him to become a revolutionary socialist.

After his return to England, Orwell began writing *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), a book about his Spanish experience, which completed his disengagement from the orthodox left. He then wished to return to India to write a book, but he became ill with tuberculosis and was forced to convalesce.

**World War II** When World War II began, he again wanted to help out. The army, however, rejected him as

physically unfit, though later he served for a period in the home guard and as a fire watcher. Instead, moving to London in 1940, he began writing "London Letters" for *Partisan Review* and joined the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as a producer in the Indian section, remaining in this position until 1943. BBC's main purpose was to help boost the morale of Indian soldiers fighting in British service. Orwell's involvement in what was basically a propaganda operation was both frustrating and a learning experience for him and may be counted among the sources of inspiration for his two subsequent masterpieces, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, both of which deal satirically with government use of propaganda.

**Orwell's Satirical Masterpieces** The year 1943 was an important one in Orwell's life for several reasons. His mother died in March; he left the BBC to become literary editor of the *Tribune*; and he began book reviewing on a more regular basis. But the most significant event occurred late that year, when he commenced writing his novel *Animal Farm*, which relates what happens to animals who free themselves and then are again enslaved through violence and fraud. Orwell had completed this fantasy satire by February 1944, but several publishers rejected it on political grounds. It was not published, however, until August 1945, when the war was over, purportedly because of paper rationing but mostly because of the unmistakable fact that it parodied the history of the Soviet Union, then an important war ally.

Toward the end of World War II, Orwell traveled to France, Germany, and Austria as a reporter. His wife died in March of 1945. The next year he settled with his youngest sister as his housekeeper on Jura, off the coast of Scotland. By then, his health was steadily deteriorating and his tuberculosis flared up frequently, but his physical weakness did not prevent him from writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. By the end of 1948 he was seriously ill. He entered a London hospital in September 1949 and the next month married Sonia Brownell. He died only months after that, in London, on January 21, 1950.

## Works in Literary Context

**Influences** Critics have noted that Orwell took from an eclectic group of influences, including Charles Dickens, Henry Fielding, Gustav Flaubert, Aldus Huxley, James Joyce, Jack London, W. Somerset Maugham, and Emile Zola, among others.

**Dystopias: A Bleak Vision of the Future** It has also often been pointed out that in creating *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell drew on earlier dystopian novels. A dystopia is a vision of society, often a future society, that is the opposite of paradise, or utopia. It is a vision of society gone horribly wrong. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* bears some similarity to H. G. Wells's dystopic *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), in which the protagonist is transported

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Orwell's famous contemporaries include:

**Rachel Carson** (1907–1964): Marine biologist, environmentalist, naturalist, and science writer whose work, *Silent Spring* (1962), was instrumental in the advent of the ecology movement and global environmentalism.

**Zora Neale Hurston** (1903–1960): African-American writer who paved the way during the Harlem Renaissance for future African-American women writers.

**James Joyce** (1882–1941): Modernist Irish expatriate writer who is typically considered one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century.

**Leon Trotsky** (1879–1940): Bolshevik revolutionary who as People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs and of War and founding commander of the Red Party was exiled for his failed opposition to Stalin. He was later assassinated in Mexico.

into a world of technological tyranny two hundred years into the future. Wells had been Orwell's favorite author when he was young. He shared not only Wells's fascination with utopian thinking but also his critical attitude toward the British class system.

However, Wells's later belief in science and rationality as the ultimate problem solvers had, in Orwell's opinion, been outdated since World War I. After all, both Hitler and Stalin had been able to harness science in the service of their dictatorships. Some scholars have also pointed to *Swastika Night* (1937) by Katharine Burdekin (writing as Murray Constantine) as a likely model. A more significant influence on Orwell's novel was probably *We* (1924), by Russian novelist Evgeny Zamyatin. In Zamyatin's dystopia, individuality has been all but obliterated; personal names have been replaced by numbers; people's lives are regulated down to the minutest details. Those who do not conform are tortured into submission by corrective brain treatment with X-rays, or publicly executed by a chemical process that might be described as vaporization, the word used in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about the sudden disappearance of unwanted persons. Orwell reviewed Zamyatin's novel in 1946 and found that it was a better novel than Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) insofar as it provided a more credible motive for the power elite to stay on top than Huxley had done. In Orwell's view no totalitarian system could exist without a ruling class motivated by power hunger, the wish to exercise power over others and keep it at any cost.

**The Left** In the early part of the twentieth century, many intellectuals and artists were sympathetic toward the Soviet Union because they had hopes that the great

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Orwell's most significant works are what are considered dystopian novels as well as commentaries on the absurdity of totalitarian cultures. Here are a few works by other writers who explore such issues:

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), by Margaret Atwood. In this dystopian novel, Canadian author Atwood speculates on a horrifying future of gender division, reproductive control, and takeover of society by the small class of elite.

*Fahrenheit 451* (1953), by Ray Bradbury. In this dystopian novel, the theme of totalitarian suppression of the masses is reflected in the storyline, one which includes burning of books (which are illegal) as the basis for the plot.

*A Clockwork Orange* (1962), by Anthony Burgess. In this futuristic work (which has its own dictionary), the powers that be have select ways for treating the truants and thugs in the small gang called the Droogs.

suffering experience by the majority of Russians under tsarist domination would be alleviated by a pure communist form of government. Quite simply, a government that valued the well-being of all its citizens seemed preferable to a government that seemed concerned only with the desires of wealthy landowners. Those who sided with the Marxists were called "leftist," and they stood in opposition to "right-wing" politicians who favored traditional social structures and governmental authority.

To Orwell the factional fighting during the Spanish Civil War between leftist political parties that were supposed to be united in their war against fascism was a shock, and *Homenaje a Cataluña* marks a turning point in his political outlook. He saw himself as a socialist and continued to do so for the rest of his life, but he was never a member of a political party. For him, socialism was first of all a matter of "justice and common decency." Even before Spain, Orwell had expressed impatience with the Marxist theorizing of left-wing intellectuals, and in Spain the Communists, Orwell realized, were employing methods for acquiring power similar to those employed by the Fascists. The common man was the sufferer. His feelings about the corruption of both right-wing and left-wing politics are clear in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*.

### Works in Critical Context

Orwell's work generally received praise in his lifetime and after. Both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm* are still widely assigned for classroom study. Orwell's socialism made him the target for some politically motivated critical

attacks, but as Cold-War tensions have faded, Orwell's personal politics have seemed less controversial and his work has enjoyed a period of renewed critical attention.

***Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)** The horrors Orwell envisioned in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were criticized for being excessive or unbelievable. Undaunted, Orwell emphasized that the novel was meant as a satire, displaying certain totalitarian ideas in their extreme consequence. Conversely, in a review of Orwell's posthumously published *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays* (1950) E. M. Forster wrote of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that "There is not a monster in that hateful apocalypse which does not exist in embryo today." It is difficult to point to any major inconsistency that may detract from the overall impact of Orwell's vision, and its detailed realism makes it all the more distressing. The book made *Time's* 2005 list of the one hundred best English-language novels since 1923.

### Responses to Literature

1. While Reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, consider the different personalities in the book. Who is meek and easily intimidated? Who is likely to resist suppression/oppression? Where do you think you would have been on the spectrum of personalities? How would you have responded—as a rebel against the absurdity? As a non-confrontational one who wants no trouble?
2. Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* was controversial at the time of its publication because its events mirrored events taking place in the Soviet Union, a wartime ally of Great Britain. Use the library and the Web to research the power struggle between Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky so that you can compare the novel's fantasy plot to the reality of the historical events.
3. Orwell fought in and wrote about the bloody Spanish Civil War that began in 1936. One of the worst atrocities of that war was the Nazi saturation bombing of the small Basque town of Guernica, which became the subject matter of a mural by Pablo Picasso. Research the painting in the library and on the Web. How does Picasso's depiction of the Spanish Civil War compare to that of Orwell. It might be useful to note that Picasso was a member of the French Communist Party.

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## Ovid

BORN: 43 BCE, Sulmo (now Sulmona), Italy

DIED: c. 18 CE, Tomis (now Constanta), Romania

NATIONALITY: Italian, Roman

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Art of Love* (1 BCE)

*Metamorphoses* (8 CE)

### Overview

Known for his elegiac couplets and a narrative poem called *Metamorphoses* that mythologizes the creation of the world, Ovid is widely recognized as one of the greatest poets of classical Rome. His works are among some of the most influential in European literature and have inspired centuries of imitation. He is considered a master Latin stylist whose technical accomplishments permanently enriched the language. His verse is distinguished by clarity of expression and exactness.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Life and Early Years at the Twilight of the Roman Republic** Ovid was born in 43 BCE, the year in which the ancient Roman republican system of govern-



Ovid © Sandro Vannini / Corbis

ment finally came to an end when both heads of government fell in battle against the would-be usurper Mark Antony. The bloody series of civil wars that followed until 31 BCE coincides with the years of Ovid's childhood and adolescence: The chilling events that accompanied this—after his defeat by Octavian, his one-time ally, Mark Antony committed suicide, as did his lover Cleopatra—cannot have failed to leave their mark, but they do not haunt Ovid's early imagination as they do those of other Roman writers such as Vergil or Propertius.

Ovid was born in Sulmo (modern Sulmona, Italy), ninety miles and a world apart from Rome, into a prosperous family of the equestrian order. The *equites*, or knights, were the second class of Roman society and supported the status quo of the ruling senatorial elite. Sent to Rome to study rhetoric under the leading rhetoricians of the time in preparation for a legal career, Ovid distinguished himself as a student, but ultimately chose the vocation of a poet. His poetic genius gained him admission to the circle around statesman and literary patron Messalla, and Ovid quickly became a favorite of the Roman elite. Here, he met the other leading poets of the day, including Propertius and Horace.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Ovid's famous contemporaries include:

**Caesar Augustus** (63 BCE–14 CE): The first emperor of the Roman Empire, from 27 BCE until his death, Augustus's strong rule ushered in the *Pax Romana*, or time of peace and stability in the empire.

**Herod the Great** (73 BCE–4 BCE): A Roman king of Judea who, according to the New Testament, was responsible for the Massacre of the Innocents, the deaths of all first-born male children in Bethlehem, in an attempt to prevent the coming of the "king of the Jews."

**Horace** (65 BCE–8 BCE): A Roman lyric poet, Horace is best known for his *Odes*.

**Livy** (59 BCE–17 CE): A Roman historian, Livy wrote a comprehensive, seven-hundred-year history of Rome.

**Vergil** (70 BCE–19 BCE): Vergil, a classical Roman poet, wrote *The Aeneid*, an epic poem telling of Rome's origins.

**Love Poetry** Ovid's first work, *Loves*, appeared originally in five volumes around 20 BCE and by 1 CE was rereleased in a shorter three-book edition, which is the only version extant today. The *Heroines* is generally regarded as Ovid's second endeavor, although some evidence suggests the work was published later in his career. Here Ovid highlights his profound knowledge of mythology and creates clever, rhetorical dramatic soliloquies of unhappy love that breathed new life into an almost exhausted Greek genre.

*The Art of Love* was published around 1 BCE and instantly caused a sensation. The poem consists of three books, a light and irreverent series of loosely connected instructions on how to find and win one's love in contemporary Rome. As this poem implicitly ridiculed the conservative moralism of the Augustan regime, Ovid quickly wrote a recantation, *The Remedies of Love*, but critics have found that work rather biting as well.

**Banishment and Metamorphoses** In 8 CE, Emperor Augustus banished Ovid, then Rome's most popular poet, to Tomis on the Black Sea (now Constanta, Romania) under somewhat peculiar and still unexplained circumstances. The poet was tried for high treason in the emperor's private court, and his sentence was pronounced directly by Augustus. Ovid's books were subsequently removed from public libraries, but he lost neither his citizenship nor property, nor was he forbidden to communicate with his friends or wife, as was normal in such cases. Ovid claimed that a poem, most likely *The Art of Love*, and an indiscretion, perhaps with Augustus's granddaughter, had caused his exile. On the eve of his

exile Ovid was composing the *Calendar*, a description of the Roman religious year, and the *Metamorphoses*. The epic *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), long recognized as his masterpiece, describes the loves and transformations of characters from classical mythology, providing masterly and accessible renditions of ancient tales.

Exile came as a great shock to Ovid; his reaction to the blow provided some of the most remarkable poetry of personal expression from antiquity. He responded to his changed circumstances by investing his emotions in elegy, the genre in which he had written as a poet-lover in his youth. Ovid's exile poetry in the *Lamentations* and the *Letters from the Black Sea* is not in the confessional style a modern reader might expect. While he frequently describes the misery of his surroundings, he focuses his defense upon his art. His pleas were in vain, however; he died in Tomis, still banished. Ovid, over the course of his life, would marry three times and divorce twice, with one daughter.

### Works in Literary Context

**Metamorphoses as Classical Sourcebook** Out of the remnants of classical literature, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* survived as a sourcebook for artists, writers, and readers seeking access to the world of Greek and Roman mythology. Many of the most seemingly familiar myths of antiquity owe their main outlines, and often their survival, to the form Ovid gives them in his poem. For modern readers, Ovid is the sole source for many tales, but his contemporaries had access to a wealth of literature, written in both Latin and Greek, in which they might have found similar versions of these narratives to hold up in comparison. While epic in scope, the work's meter, tone, and subject are quite unlike Rome's imperial epic, Vergil's *Aeneid*. Drawn from Greek mythology, Roman folklore, and Mesopotamian sources, the stories constituting the *Metamorphoses* are all linked by a common motif—transformation.

**Ovid's Lasting Literary Influence** Ovid's banishment and the removal of his works from public access did nothing to diminish his popularity, as illustrated by the appearance of quotes from *The Art of Love* in graffiti around the city of Pompeii. While some contemporaries criticized Ovid for his lack of control and irreverent tone in his verse, other writers freely mimicked Ovidian poetic technique. In medieval times, commentators and translators revised his poems into allegories by purging their erotic content in accordance with Christian doctrine. However, the stories and concepts in the *Metamorphoses*, *Loves*, and *Heroines*, as interpreted by the medieval traveling poets, or minstrels, helped form the concept of courtly love, which played an important role in the creation of Arthurian literature.

Ovid's influence upon English literature began with Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower. William Shakespeare

drew heavily on Ovid in his earliest tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, and Ovid's influence can be traced throughout Shakespeare's career. For the poets of the Enlightenment, the intellectual play, which represents the hallmark of Ovid's style, evoked a deep similarity to their own approach to poetry. John Dryden and Alexander Pope not only translated much of Ovid's verse, but their original work also shows his influence. In the twentieth century, readers of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid* encounter the poet of the *Metamorphoses* in revived form.

**Ovid's Influence on the Visual Arts** In the visual arts, Ovid's myths have always provided a rich source of inspiration. The list of painters and sculptors who have treated Ovidian themes is long and includes such artists as Italian Renaissance painter Titian, French painter Nicolas Poussin, Dutch painter Pieter Brueghel, Flemish Baroque painters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck, French Romantic painter and lithographer Eugene Delacroix, and Belarusian-French modernist painter Marc Chagall.

### Works in Critical Context

Ovid has always appealed more to artists than to scholars. His works never formed part of the school curriculum in antiquity, and the *Metamorphoses* were sanitized during the fourteenth century. At various times during this period, Ovid's poetry was also banned or heavily censored. However, Ovid's works were frequently translated into English in the mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and his critical reputation was enhanced. Opinions varied: For instance, Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* in 1567 became immensely popular, going through six printings during Shakespeare's lifetime, while Christopher Marlowe's adaptation of *Loves*, published in 1597 as *The Elegies*, was publicly burned in 1599. In general, though some critics regard Ovid as a frivolous and superficial poet, others praise his complex mastery of poetic form and narrative skill, and extraordinary grasp of the human, particularly feminine, psyche.

**The Complexity of Metamorphoses** In the Spring 1972 issue of the journal *Arethusa*, Leo Curran questioned the rhetorical intention and meaning of *Metamorphoses*. He addressed the "numerous possibilities" of the work and asked the reader whether *Metamorphoses* could be considered epic or entertainment, neutral or profound, poetic or philosophical. Eight years after Curran's article, Catherine Rorer also wrote in *Arethusa* that "Ovid has moved beyond the stable and architectonic structures of classical art." In translating *Metamorphoses* in *Tales from Ovid* (1997), poet Ted Hughes chose to simplify Ovid's varied and often complicated metonymic references; Ovid used so many different words for a person or object that sometimes the actual identity may not be obvious. Hughes also streamlined Ovid's excessive use of detail, as scholar Christian Hogel noted, and tried to centralize certain themes. Hogel offered Hughes's work almost as a critique of Ovid: Hughes pared down

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Ovid turned myth from the realm of the religious to the aesthetic and imaginative. The stories in his *Metamorphoses* have influenced much literature and popular culture, including the following works.

*The Labors of Hercules* (1947), a collection by Agatha Christie. This short-story collection takes the twelve labors of the classical strongman Hercules and turns each into a related mystery that Hercule Poirot, Belgian detective, must solve.

*The Mask of Apollo* (1966), a novel by Mary Renault. An actor in ancient Greece reluctantly gets involved with the volatile political situation; his moral guide is a mask of Apollo, god of music, representing harmony and order, to whom there was a famous shrine in Delphi.

*My Fair Lady* (1964), a film directed by George Cukor. This musical starring Audrey Hepburn and Rex Harrison reinvents the myth of Pygmalion, the sculptor who falls in love with the woman he creates.

*Orpheus* (1950), a film directed by Jean Cocteau. This movie, set in Paris, retells the story of Orpheus, a gifted musician, who goes to the Underworld to reclaim his beloved wife after her death.

*Tales from Ovid* (1997), poetry by Ted Hughes. The former poet laureate of England translates twenty-four stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in this prize-winning collection.

Ovid's classic layering to focus on the "stories told by Ovid" and reveal their "symbolic value."

**The Meaning of Loves** As suggested by scholar Sara Mack, the title of Ovid's work *Amores*, or *Loves*, can hold a number of meanings: in Latin, "The plural amores can ... refer to girlfriends, love affairs, or love poems." The fifty poems in the volume follow a style called a "love elegy" and express a hopeless passion; they are playful in tone, indicating that the narrator will not truly die of his love. With *Amores*, Ovid is said to have invented the "posing poet-lover" and inspired John Donne.

### Responses to Literature

1. Ovid's banishment arguably might have been the defining moment of his life. Write an informal essay addressing this question: If you were forced to live in a different country from your family and friends, do you think you would adjust, or would you always be affected by it?
2. Ovid was an immensely popular writer in Roman times, but some people today consider him "frivolous." Think of a contemporary writer or other artist

who is very popular but whom critics don't always take seriously. Write an essay describing his or her work, what critics object to in it, and whether you think the author is being criticized fairly.

3. The theme in *The Art of Love*, how to find and keep your love, is still popular. Think of tips you could give someone today—for example, “don’t text message the person you like more than three times a day.” In a small group of your classmates, write out three to five tips, and read them aloud.
4. In his poems from exile, Ovid writes about the place of art in his life, not only as the cause of his personal disaster, but also as the source of his salvation. Write a personal statement in which you describe how the arts might help you deal with your problems when things go wrong. Be sure to give specific examples.

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## Amos Oz

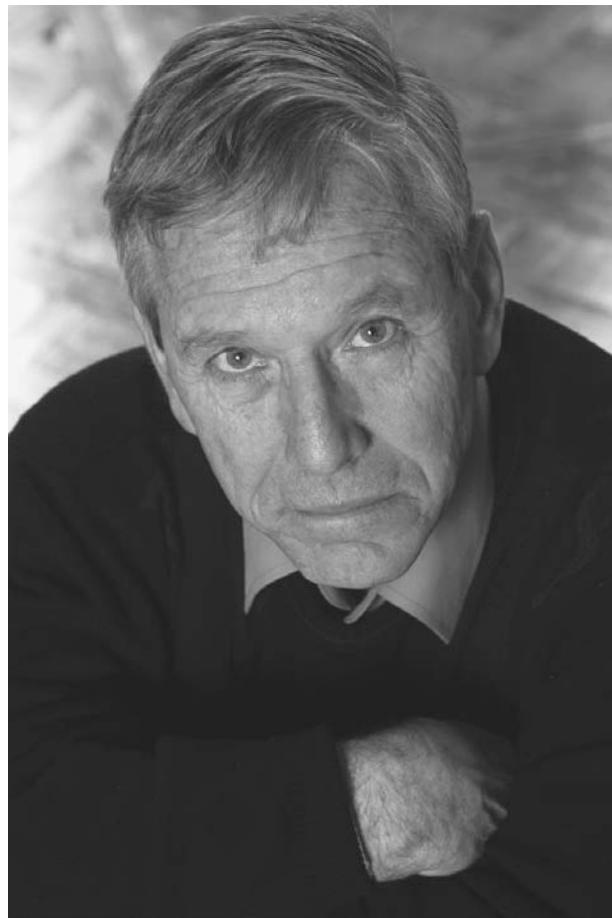
BORN: 1939, Jerusalem

NATIONALITY: Israeli

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Where the Jackals Howl, and Other Stories* (1965)



Amos Oz Oz, Amos, photograph. Ulf Andersen / Getty Images.

*Elsewhere, Perhaps* (1966)

*My Michael* (1968)

*Unto Death* (1971)

*A Perfect Peace* (1983)

#### Overview

In his fiction and nonfiction alike, Israeli author Amos Oz describes a populace under emotional and physical siege and a society threatened by internal contradictions and contention. Immensely popular in his own country, Oz has also established an international reputation, with translations of his books appearing in more than fifteen languages.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Zionism, to the Right and to the Left** Born into a family of right-wing Zionist supporters that included several writers and scholars, Oz grew up in a house that both eschewed religion (a tendency strengthened by his mother's suicide when Amos was twelve years old) and supported a strong and independent Jewish state. In this, Oz's background typifies one of the central quandaries of

Jewishness in the modern world: a difficult blend of religious history and ethnic claims that makes identity a site of struggle. Partially in response to just this struggle, Oz left his native city of Jerusalem during the 1950s to join a kibbutz, or collective farm. The kibbutz movement in Israel was dedicated to communal Jewishness, such that many kibbutz members of that period owned no personal property at all; although distinctly a movement of the left, kibbutzim (the plural of kibbutz) were not Marxist in orientation, primarily because of their commitment to religious principles. In this sense, there was a continuity with his childhood, since Zionism (the desire for an independent Jewish nation-state) continued to play a large role in his life. Later, sent to study literature and philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Oz received his bachelor's degree in 1963 and returned to his kibbutz to concentrate on farming, teaching, and writing. In stories collected in *Where the Jackals Howl, and Other Stories* (1965), Oz uses the jackal as a symbol of forces that threaten the stability of an isolated kibbutz, both from outside its guarded perimeter and from within its domestic sphere. Although mildly received in Israel, this collection won praise in the United States for its accurate rendering of kibbutz life.

**Personal Challenges to the Political** With his novel *My Michael* (1968), Oz achieved popular success and established an international reputation as one of Israel's foremost authors. Set in Jerusalem during the 1950s, this work alternates between stark realism and romantic lyricism to relate excerpts from a diary that describes the ambivalent sexual fantasies of an unhappily married woman. While some Jewish nationalist reviewers regarded the book as a nearly seditious allegory of their country and its relationships with Arab Israelis, western critics compared *My Michael* to Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* for its restrained portrayal of an individual's private struggle against adverse social circumstances. *Unto Death* (1971), inspired by Oz's reaction to Israel's Six-Day War with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in 1967, consists of the novellas *Late Love* and *Crusade*. In addition to shifting the balance of power in the Middle East, the Six-Day War—precipitated in large part by Egyptian aggression, and begun with a “preemptive” attack by the Israelis—cemented a tradition of Arab-Israeli struggle in the region. Together with the 1973 Yom Kippur War, it has often served, within Israel, as a justification for oppression of Palestinian Arabs and, in the Arab world, as an incitement to destruction of the Israeli state altogether.

In *Touch the Water, Touch the Wind* (1973), Oz blends comic fantasy, allegory, and symbolism to chronicle the experiences of a Polish-Jewish mathematician from his internment in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany during World War II through the Six-Day War. Incorporating the protagonist's rise to world prominence and his reunion with his estranged wife with fantastical events, including the transformation of humans into animals, this novel garnered angry reactions from Israeli

critics for attempting to deal with atrocities in comic or surrealistic terms. Critic Alfred Kazin, however, declared that Oz “is an immensely clever, subtle, and mischievous writer whose new book is a brilliant scenario of all Jewish experience of our day.” *True Repose* (1983), published in response to Israel's war with Lebanon, reflects Oz's dissatisfaction with his country's often violent response to differences with its neighbors. This novel concerns the decision of a young man to flee his confining existence in a kibbutz and seek suicidal escape in the Jordanian desert. Oz also began, long before this, to support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (the ongoing animosity and hostilities between a largely Jewish Israeli majority and a largely Muslim Palestinian minority in the state of Israel), a position that has made him less than popular with many Zionists inside and outside of Israel.

Oz's next novel, *A Perfect Peace* (1983), centers on domestic conflicts that result when the son of a Zionist founder rejects his family and life in a kibbutz to escape the constrictive ideologies of his ancestors. After a naïve but passionate young man who idealizes kibbutz existence joins the community and supplants the protagonist, Oz's hero shames his family by inviting his successor to share his wife and home before departing to seek his own identity in enemy territory.

**The Unity of an Essay Versus the Plurality of a Novel** Oz is also noted for his essays on political and literary topics. *In the Land of Israel* (1983) is a collection of interviews Oz conducted with Jewish and Arab Israelis from diverse social and political backgrounds. Originally published as a series of articles in the socialist newspaper *Davar*, these pieces, according to Robert Alter, “reflect a strenuous effort to go out into Israeli society and sound its depths.” Oz is also coeditor of the Israeli magazine *Siach lochamim* and has contributed articles to such journals as *Encounter* and *Partisan Review*.

Married and the father of three children, Oz continues to live and work at Kibbutz Hulda, and is a professor of literature at Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, Israel. He also speaks and travels frequently, bringing his personal thoughts to television and lecture audiences in Israel and abroad. Describing his creative impulses, Oz told the *New York Times*: “Whenever I find myself in total agreement with myself, then I write an article—usually in rage—telling the government what to do. But when I detect hesitation, more than one inner voice, I discover in me the embryo of characters, the seeds of a novel.” His more recent work has included the novels *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God* (2000) and *Suddenly in the Depth of the Forest (A Fable for All Ages)* (2005), and the nonfiction *How to Cure a Fanatic* (2006).

## Works in Literary Context

Writing exclusively in Hebrew, Oz has been widely praised for his use of a carefully modulated literary style that blends surrealistic fantasy, symbolism, and allegory.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Oz's famous contemporaries include:

**Arthur Miller** (1915–2005): An American playwright famous for his plays—including *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*—and for his personal life—his controversial politics and his marriage to Marilyn Monroe.

**Günter Grass** (1927–): A Nobel Prize-winning German playwright and author, Grass is a key figure in the magical realist movement. He was the subject of controversy in 2006 when he revealed his service with the Nazi Waffen-SS in the last months of World War II, in contradiction to earlier statements and to his leftist politics.

**Moshe Dayan** (1915–1981): Distinctive for his bald pate and black eyepatch, Dayan was a celebrated and controversial figure in the history of Israel. As minister of defense, he helped lead his country to victory in both the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War.

**Anwar El Sadat** (1918–1981): The Egyptian president who most radically altered Egypt's foreign and domestic policies, instituting a multiparty political system and signing the first Arab peace treaty with Israel. The latter action was directly responsible for his assassination at the hands of an Egyptian extremist.

**Oliver North** (1943–): An obscure U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant colonel, North was thrust into the public spotlight when he was implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan administration, which involved illegally trading arms to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages.

**Pope John Paul II** (1920–2005): The second-longest-reigning pope, the first Polish pope, and the first non-Italian pope in over four hundred years, John Paul II was one of the most successful and popular popes of the modern age. Upon his death, calls were raised by many theologians and laypeople for his immediate elevation to sainthood.

“As a seamstress who takes different pieces of cloth and sews them into a quilt, Amos Oz writes short pieces of fiction which together form a quilt in the reader’s consciousness,” notes J. Justin Gustainis in *Best Sellers*, continuing. “Just as the quilt may be of many colors but still one garment, Oz’s stories speak of many things but still pay homage to one central idea: universal redemption through suffering.”

**The Kibbutz and the Family Unit** The kibbutz provides Oz with a powerful symbol of the nation’s aspirations, as well as a microcosm of the larger Jewish family in Israel, suffocatingly intimate and inescapable, yet united in defense against the hostile forces besieging its borders. *New York Times Book Review* contributor

Robert Alter observes that nearly all of Oz’s fiction “is informed by the same symbolic world picture: a hemmed-in cluster of fragile human habitations (the kibbutz, the state of Israel itself) surrounded by dark, menacing mountains where jackals howl and hostile aliens lurk.” According to *Jewish Quarterly* contributor Jacob Sonntag, the people of Oz’s fiction “are part of the landscape, and the landscape is part of the reality from which there is no escape.” If the landscape is inescapable, the bonds of family also offer little relief. Oz’s fiction addresses the generational conflicts that are particularly tense in modern Israel: conflicts often marked by a contrast between the bitter pragmatism of a younger generation and the increasingly desperate pragmatism of their elders.

**The Conflicts of Zionism** A central concern of Oz’s fiction is the conflict between idealistic Zionism and the realities of life in a pluralistic society. Paul Zweig claims in the *New York Times Book Review* that when *My Michael* was published in Israel shortly after the Six-Day War, it proved “extremely disturbing to Israelis. At a time when their country had asserted control over its destiny as never before, Oz spoke of an interior life which Israel had not had time for, which it had paid no heed to, an interior life that contained a secret bond to the Asiatic world beyond its border.”

As a corollary to this, many of his *sabra*, or native-born Israeli, characters have decidedly ambivalent feelings towards the Arab population, especially Palestinians. *Commentary* essayist Ruth R. Wisse writes that in book after book, “Oz has taken the great myths with which modern Israel is associated—the noble experiment of the kibbutz, the reclamation of the soil, the wars against the British and the Arabs, the phoenix-like rise of the Jewish spirit out of the ashes of the Holocaust—and shown us their underside: bruised, dazed, and straying characters who move in an atmosphere of almost unalleviated depression.” A part of the bruisedness of these characters is in relation to a system of morality that, on the one hand, is guided by deeply felt ideals of communalism and brotherhood and that, on the other, has served to justify the oppression of Palestinians for decades.

**Internal Demons and Redemptive Humor** “Daytime Israel makes a tremendous effort to create the impression of the determined, tough, simple, uncomplicated society ready to fight back, ready to hit back twice as hard, courageous and so on,” Oz told the *Partisan Review*. “Nocturnal Israel,” he continued, “is a refugee camp with more nightmares per square mile I guess than any other place in the world. Almost everyone has seen the devil.” The obsessions of “nocturnal Israel” fuel Oz’s work, in which few psychic stones if any are left unturned—no matter what might be found beneath them. This is not to suggest, however, that Oz’s work is unrelentingly somber or polemical. Indeed, many find that Oz’s humor has a redemptive quality of its own.

## Works in Critical Context

According to Judith Chernaik in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Oz writes books that are “indispensable reading for anyone who wishes to understand . . . life in Israel, the ideology that sustains it, and the passions that drive its people.” In a *New Republic* assessment of the author’s talents, Ian Sanders notes: “Amos Oz is an extraordinarily gifted Israeli novelist who delights his readers with both verbal brilliance and the depiction of eternal struggles—between flesh and spirit, fantasy and reality, Jew and Gentile. . . . His carefully reconstructed worlds are invariably transformed into symbolic landscapes, vast arenas where primeval forces clash.” *Times Literary Supplement* contributor and novelist A. S. Byatt observes that in his works on Israel, Oz “can write with delicate realism about small lives, or tell fables about large issues, but his writing, even in translation, gains vitality simply from his subject matter.” And *New York Review of Books* reviewer D. J. Enright calls Oz Israel’s “most persuasive spokesman to the outside world, the literary part of it at least.”

***My Michael*** *My Michael*, a novel about the psychological disintegration of a young Israeli housewife, was Oz’s first work translated and published in English. *New Republic* contributor Lesley Hazleton calls the book “a brilliant and evocative portrait of a woman slowly giving way to schizoid withdrawal” and “a superb achievement, . . . the best novel to come out of Israel to date.” In *Modern Fiction Studies*, Hana Wirth-Nesher expresses the view that Oz uses his alienated protagonist “to depict the isolation and fear that many Israelis feel partially as a country in a state of siege and partially as a small enclave of Western culture in a vast area of cultures and landscapes unlike what they have known.” Alter praises *My Michael* for managing “to remain so private, so fundamentally apolitical in its concerns, even as it puts to use the most portentous political materials.” Disturbing though many found it, *My Michael* was a best seller in Israel; it established Oz’s reputation among his fellow Israelis and gave him entrée into the international world of letters.

***Portraits of Israel*** Critics find much to praise in Oz’s portraits of the struggling nation of Israel. “Mr. Oz’s words, his sensuous prose and indelible imagery, the people he flings living onto his pages, evoke a cauldron of sentiments at the boil; yet his human vision is capacious enough to contain the destruction and hope for peace,” writes Richard R. Lingeman in the *New York Times*. “He has caught a welter of fears, curses and dreams at a watershed moment in history, when an uneasy, restless waiting gave way to an upsurge of violence, of fearsome consequences. The power of his art fuses historical fact and symbol; he makes the ancient stones of Jerusalem speak, and the desert beyond a place of jackals and miracles.” In the *Saturday Review*, Alfred Kazin states that Oz’s effect on him is always to make him realize “how little we know about what goes on inside

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Other works to address the theme of redemption through suffering include:

*The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), a novel by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. One of the central themes of Dostoyevsky’s last novel is having to experience misery on the way to redemption, as personified by such characters as Dmitri, Grushenka, and Katerina.

*David Copperfield* (1850), a novel by Charles Dickens. Throughout Dickens’s coming-of-age novel, several characters choose to repent for previous misdeeds through hard work and good deeds.

The *Star Wars* movies (1977–1983, 1999–2005), a series of films directed by George Lucas. The central character of the six-film arc is Anakin Skywalker/Darth Vader, whose descent into evil is reversed by his son’s love. Ultimately Anakin dies to save his son, thus redeeming himself.

the Israeli head. . . . To the unusually sensitive and humorous mind of Amos Oz, the real theme of Jewish history—especially in Israel—is unreality. When, and how can a Jew attain reality in the Promised Land, actually touch the water, touch the wind?”

## Responses to Literature

1. Amos Oz often addresses the animosity that sometimes arises between Jews and Gentiles. Select one of his works in which this occurs and, in a short essay, trace the origin of the animosity and how it develops into open hatred.
2. Despite the fact that Oz’s stories center on Israel, they have a universal quality. Analyze how Oz is able to evoke this universality. What techniques does he use in his descriptions of characters and locations that makes them seem to be “more than they are”?
3. Research the *kibbutz* movement in Israel: its history, its goals, its current status. Apply what you have learned to Oz’s depictions of the kibbutz. With a group of your classmates who have read the same Oz stories, analyze the camaraderie and purpose of a kibbutz in Oz’s fiction.
4. Amos Oz has taken an active role in promoting peace in the Middle East, meeting Palestinian leaders in an effort to hammer out a workable peace plan, performing what he calls the “gruntwork of peace.” Write a paragraph describing how you think Oz defines the gruntwork of peace. Why is it so critical to the peace process?

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## José Emilio Pacheco

BORN: 1939, Mexico City, Mexico

NATIONALITY: Mexican

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

"You'll Die Far Away" (1967)

*Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By* (1969)

"You Will Go and Not Return" (1973)

"I Look at the Earth" (1986)

*The Silence of the Moon* (1995)

### Overview

José Emilio Pacheco is considered the most mature and original of the generation of Mexican poets who began writing in the 1960s. Critical and ironic, self-conscious yet modest, socially aware and aesthetically impressive, his poetry provides excellent insight for the reader interested in contemporary Mexican literature and culture.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Collaborative Efforts from the Start** José Emilio Pacheco was born in Mexico City on June 30, 1939. His father was an attorney who had come from humble



José Emilio Pacheco Victor Rojas / AFP / Getty Images

beginnings, and his mother came from a family of conservative and devoutly Catholic businesspeople.

In his teens Pacheco began studying law and Spanish literature at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in 1957. His twenties and thirties coincided with a boom in literary and artistic production in Mexico City. In the 1950s and 1960s, he moved in the same circles as Rosario Castellanos, Carlos Fuentes, and Octavio Paz, entering this set in 1957 by coediting with Carlos Monsiváis a literary supplement for young writers in *Seasons*. This early collaboration with strong mentors began a life in journalism that yielded thousands of articles, book reviews, essays, and notes in several publications, including *News*, *Mexican Literary Journal*, *Plural*, and *Return*. He became a contributor to the literary supplement *Mexico in Culture* in 1958 and served as editorial secretary to the journal, among others. Pacheco's best-known journalistic contribution is his long-running column of cultural criticism, "Taking Stock," published weekly in *Process* beginning in 1976.

**Working with Imagined Others** Pacheco's first book, a slim volume of short stories titled *The Blood of Medusa*, appeared in 1958. This early work includes a section of "Approximations," consisting of "translations" of imagined "original" versions of poems by such major figures as Gérard de Nerval and Arthur Rimbaud. This section demonstrates Pacheco's early tendencies toward making poetry "collective."

Pacheco's father died in 1964. Two years later Pacheco's second book, *The Repose of Fire* (1966), was published. The work reflects the turbulence of the 1960s and considers the notions of the destructive passing of time. The poems, thick with disillusionment, began what was to be a central focus of Pacheco's poetry for years to come. In 1966 Pacheco also collaborated with Paz, Homero Aridjis, and Alí Chumacero on the canon-forming anthology *Poetry in Motion: Mexico 1915–1966*. In 1967 he published the novel *You Will Die in a Distant Land*, which was critically acclaimed and won the Magda Donato Prize.

**Responding to History** On October 2, 1968, riot police and soldiers opened fire on an antigovernment demonstration at the Plaza of the Three Cultures in the Tlatelolco neighborhood of Mexico City. An estimated three hundred unarmed citizens were killed. This event led Pacheco in his next book, *Don't Ask Me How the Time Goes By: Poems 1964–1968* (1969), to begin to blend artistic sensibilities with ethics and to craft poetry with a clear social message. The book introduced one of Pacheco's most effective poetic weapons against social injustice: poems that interweave historical texts with contemporary issues.

Pacheco's next work was a short-story collection titled *The Pleasure Principle* (1972), which won the prestigious Xavier Villaurrutia Prize. Next Pacheco coauthored with the director Arturo Ripstein the screenplays for the award-winning movies *The Castle of Purity* (1973) and *The Holy Office* (1974). By 1978 Pacheco had written two more books and had collaborated with the artist Rojo on *Kindergarten*, a limited-edition book/art object that includes the series of twenty poems of the same title that was later included in *Since Then: Poems, 1975–1978* (1980). *Kindergarten* was the most autobiographical, or self-referential, poetry Pacheco had written to that point.

**Gaining International Recognition** By the late 1970s Pacheco's poems were receiving international recognition. Esteemed poets and translators Alastair Reid and Thomas Hoeksema worked translations of two of his books, and in 1980 Pacheco won the National Prize for Journalism and News for his "Inventario" column. Perhaps the most important sign of Pacheco's stature at this time was the publication of *Sooner or Later*. This lauded volume appeared in 1980, shortly after the poet's fortieth birthday.

In 1981 Pacheco published a hugely successful novel, *Battles in the Desert*. Another volume of poetry, *The Works of the Sea*, appeared in 1983. In 1984 Pacheco published the collection *Century's End and Other Poems* and in 1985 the illustrated *An Ark for the Next Millennium: Poems*. Also in 1985, José María Guelbenzu edited a collection of his work as *High Treason: Poetic Anthology*, and Pacheco was elected to the National Academy of Mexico, one of the highest honors a Mexican intellectual can achieve.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pacheco's famous contemporaries include:

**Robert Haas** (1941–): An American poet, he has served two terms as U.S. poet laureate (from 1995 to 1997) and has contributed greatly to contemporary literature.

**Stephen Hawking** (1942–): A British theoretical physicist known for his important work on relativity, black holes, and radiation theory.

**Carlos Fuentes** (1928–): Mexican novelist whose works have been hugely influential in Latin American literature. His works include *The Death of Artemio Cruz* and *The Old Gringo* (1985).

**Luis Echeverría** (1922–): President of Mexico from 1970 to 1976.

**Joe Orton** (1933–1967): An English satirical playwright, he wrote risqué black comedies that shocked and amused his audiences.

**Mexico City Earthquake** Pacheco had noted in *Repose of Fire* that Mexico City was constructed on the unstable dry bed of Lake Texcoco, in a valley rimmed by two volcanoes where three tectonic plates meet. The citizens of Mexico City are accustomed to tremors and seismic rumblings, but on September 19, 1985, the city was struck by an earthquake that measured eight on the Richter scale, claimed more than eight thousand lives, and caused an estimated \$4 billion in damage. Pacheco, who was teaching at the University of Maryland at the time of the earthquake, recorded his reaction to the disaster in the poem sequence "The Ruins of Mexico," which appeared in his *I Watch the Earth: Poems 1983–1986* (1986). These sixty short poems, says critic Michael J. Doudoroff, were Pacheco's "aftershock."

**New Media, Professorship, Fighting the Fascist Within** In 1995 Pacheco saw the publication of *The Silence of the Moon: Poems 1985–1993. The Silence of the Moon* won the Premio José Asunción Silva (José Asunción Silva Award) as the best book of poetry written in Latin America from 1990 to 1995.

Since 1996 Pacheco has been distinguished university professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Maryland. He also teaches at the National College of Mexico, where he became professor emeritus in 1990. He has lectured in universities across America as well, including University of California at Berkeley and New York University. In 2000 he received the Premio Alux a la Eminencia for his work as a whole, and in 2003 he was awarded the International Octavio Paz Prize for Poetry and Essay.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Pacheco was quite concerned with the sites of human failure. Here are a few works by other writers who have addressed themes of disintegration, ruin, and catastrophe:

*All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), a novel by Erich Maria Remarque. In this acclaimed work, the central theme is one of detachment—revealing the effect of war on soldiers.

*Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), a novel by Gabriel García Márquez. In this work of fiction the esteemed author explores unrequited love as well as themes of aging, suffering, and physical and emotional deterioration.

*State of Siege* (2002), a novel by Juan Goytisolo. This highly praised work explores human indifference and decline in war-torn Sarajevo.

*The Waste Land* (1922), a poem by T. S. Eliot. In this seminal work, the Nobel Prize-winning English poet explores the disillusionment, spiritual ennui, and social erosion of post-World War I European sensibility.

## Works in Literary Context

**Profound Influences** Pacheco is a largely self-taught man with an encyclopedic knowledge of literature and history, and his work reflects a wide range of influences. He writes poems in traditions ranging from that represented by Jorge Luis Borges's story "Borges and I" (1960) to that of Heraclitus of Ephesus, with significant dips into translations of Matthew Arnold and Constantine Cavafy along the way.

**Death, Destruction, and the Lethality of Time** Pacheco's poetry often takes further influence for its themes from contemporary civic and political events and concerns—local catastrophes, the Vietnam War, the death of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and Mexican politics. The war in Vietnam, for example, informs "Idyll" (1973), in which lovers unwittingly stumble onto the grounds of a chemical weapons plant (manufacturing chemicals to be used against the Vietnamese people; the use of the defoliant Agent Orange, in particular, has proven to have devastating long-term consequences for Vietnamese soldiers and civilians from affected areas alike, as well as for the invading soldiers upon their return home). The Mexico City earthquake of 1985 informs "The Ruins of Mexico" (1986).

The theme that ties all these pieces together, however, is a familiar one in the work of Pacheco—the theme of the insubstantiality of experience through time. Throughout his work the poet consistently deals with

themes of world catastrophe, disintegration and change, and, especially, the destructive properties of time.

**Common Speech Style** In moving toward a distinctive style of writing, Pacheco shared in a literary trend with a group of other young Mexican poets. This new development was known as colloquial realism: Its main objective was to bring Mexican poetry nearer to common speech. Pacheco's poetry is notable for such use of speech, just as it is most original for a multitude of new components he brought together—sets of short poems, satires, epigrams, quotations, letters, haiku, fables, bestiaries, and "approximations" (Pacheco's word for his own free translations of others' works).

## Works in Critical Context

In addition to being adamantly private and modest about his life and work, Pacheco has also stated that he believes that no text is ever fully complete; therefore, he tends to edit and even to rewrite his poems so that a poem that appears in one of his collections may reappear in different versions in subsequent editions of that book and in other collections. Bibliographers and critics thus have difficulty in making definitive statements about many of the poems. Nevertheless, critics of late have made efforts to identify the intellectual and moral precision that enables Pacheco to create a poetic form for his vision. One work that demonstrates Pacheco's style and skill is "The Ruins of Mexico."

**"The Ruins of Mexico" (1986)** Critics like Michael Doudoroff have called this piece "perhaps his most important single poem since *The Repose of Fire*." In this first and longest poem of *I Look at the Earth* (1986), Pacheco responds to the devastating event of the Mexico earthquake of 1985 by discarding the ironic and detached tone of most of his mature work. At the center of the poem is a real human calamity, approached from every possible point of view: The poem is written from a geological angle, the standpoint of specific images of destruction, and the point of view of the spectator responding to destruction and personal loss. It also features perspectives that question reality and perception, make predictions after the fact, and discuss personal historical markers promising a reattachment to reality.

Critics are in agreement that Pacheco's strengths are the authenticity of his poetic voice and his creation of new poetic forms, such as his "approximations" and his combining of sets of related poems and associated texts into one Pacheco poem.

## Responses to Literature

1. The "approximations" that appear in Pacheco's books range from very precise and formally exact translations to extensively rewritten interpretations. One of his approximations in *I Look at the Earth*, for example, is a translation of American poet Ezra

- Pound's translation of a Japanese version of an ancient Chinese poem. Consider in a group the importance of translations (in this case, a fourth-generation translation). What effect does a poem from a different language have on readers today? Who would find different translations beneficial?
2. Pacheco's poetic quotes, translations, and rewritings reflect his view of poetry. He sees poetry as essentially social and transient, with no single meaning enduring through all ages and cultures and, in a sense, no single author. To better appreciate his intentions, decide how poetry is "social." Then, discuss how poetry can be transient—moving from one place to the next and having no roots in any one place. What are some examples of how Pacheco treats poetry as a collective creation rather than the work of a single author?
  3. Pacheco's work sometimes includes "found" poems—fragments of prose texts from many sources. Found poems can also derive from movie scenes, dialogue, or even overheard conversations. Go out in the world and "find" some poetry. Listen to a conversation on a bus. Pull a technical book from the shelf. Take ideas for colors from a famous painting. Jot down anything you find striking and turn your findings into a poem.

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## Orhan Pamuk

BORN: 1952, Istanbul, Turkey

NATIONALITY: Turkish

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

- The White Castle* (1985)  
*The Black Book* (1990)  
*The New Life* (1994)  
*My Name Is Red* (1998)  
*Snow* (2002)

### Overview

Novelist Orhan Pamuk is the first Nobel laureate in literature from Turkey. He is an author shadowed by controversy and censorship, yet he has earned more than fifteen esteemed literary awards for works that have been translated into more than fifty languages. About his career, Pamuk has asserted, "I think less than people think I do about politics. I care about writing."

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

#### *Wealthy Beginnings and Western Influence*

Orhan Pamuk was born in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1952. He grew up in a family that began wealthy but lost much of its fortune by the time Pamuk reached adulthood. Pamuk's father, a civil engineer by training, inherited his father's railroad company, but he and his brothers mismanaged the business, and their inheritance vanished in unwise real estate investments. Pamuk's mother came from a textile-manufacturing dynasty; as a result, her family was part of the new, middle-class elite.



Orhan Pamuk *Pamuk, Orhan, photograph.* AP Images.

Turkey emerged from World War II as an ally to the Western powers, and in the 1950s, a sweeping modernization, a booming economy, and a rising democracy party inspired a change in the country's identity as an Islamic, Arabic-world-allied state. As a child, the only time Pamuk ever visited a mosque was with a family servant, he told Fernanda Eberstadt in an interview that appeared in the *New York Times*: "It was a place where the servants met to gossip, and I was so Westernized I felt naked taking off my shoes."

**Architecture and Writing** Pamuk dreamed of becoming an artist during much of his youth, but his family viewed this pursuit as impractical. Instead he studied architecture at Istanbul Technical College, but quit after three years. He spent much of that time writing and reading books from the Western world's most well-known authors.

Pamuk earned a degree from the University of Istanbul's Institute of Journalism in 1976 and continued to work on his fiction. After several years, he found a publisher for his first work, *Ceydet Bey and His Sons* (1982), which became the first of his books to top Turkey's best-seller list. The first of Pamuk's works to appear in English was *The White Castle* (1985), in 1990. A year later, the

novel reached the *New York Times* year-end list of the most notable books of 1991.

**Success and Rejected Accolades** *The White Castle* was published in English the same year that Pamuk's fourth novel, *The Black Book*, appeared in Turkey. Pamuk wrote it in the mid-1980s while living in New York City with his wife, who was pursuing a doctorate in history at Columbia University. After Pamuk's next novel, *The New Life*, another best seller, the success of *My Name Is Red* (1998) in Turkey resulted in an unusual offer for Pamuk: his government wanted to give him the title of state artist, a prestigious honor. He refused, however, telling *Time International* journalist Andrew Finkel that "for years I have been criticizing the state for putting authors in jail, for only trying to solve the Kurdish problem by force, and for its narrow-minded nationalism. I don't know why they tried to give me the prize." Pamuk referenced a longstanding conflict with Turkey's Kurdish minority, an ethnic group whose population spills over into Iran, Iraq, and Syria, all of which share borders with Turkey. The Kurds have long sought an independent state, but have repeatedly been the target of ethnic cleansing by various powers, including Turkey and Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq.

**Nobel Prize** Pamuk's next book, the political thriller *Snow*, appeared in 2002. Acclaimed author John Updike, reviewing *Snow* in the *New Yorker*, found some fault in the story and the conflict Pamuk's protagonist represents, but conceded, "We should not forget that in Turkey... to write with honest complexity about such matters as head scarves and religious belief takes courage." Updike also predicted that Pamuk was Turkey's "most likely candidate for the Nobel Prize." Updike's assertion proved true, when, a little more than two years after that *New Yorker* review, Pamuk became the first Turkish writer to win the world's most prestigious literary honor.

**Speaking Out against Ethnic Cleansing** In the intervening months, Pamuk successfully won a lawsuit that might have resulted in jail time. The charges were filed against him by a conservative Islamic group in Turkey for remarks he had made to a Swiss publication in February 2005 about the ethnic cleansing of Kurds and the organized slaughter of Armenians in 1915 during the final days of the Ottoman Empire. The judicial proceedings attracted international attention and were considered a potential setback for Turkey's bid to join the European Union at a future date; some viewed the Nobel committee's choice of Pamuk as a clear political statement on the question of cultural freedom in the twenty-first century.

## Works in Literary Context

**Caught between Two Worlds** Just as Pamuk's fiction deals with protagonists who are caught between two worlds, his style blurs the line between the realism of Western literature and fantasy elements common to

Arabic literary tradition. As the *New Yorker's* David Remnick suggests, "The polarities of Pamuk's books echo the basic polarities of Istanbul: the tension between East and West, the pull of an Islamic past and the lure of modern European manners and materialism." As scholar Walter Armbrust explains, the novelists of the republic wrote with "everyday speech" in a style of writing known as "inverted sentence." In other words, theirs was the genre of realism and the key characteristic of their style was brevity. By contrast, Pamuk's novels are longer, the style more elaborate, the tone often cold and distancing. Such advanced techniques moved Pamuk into the newer genre: postmodernism.

**Digging Up the Past** Furthermore, in keeping with his most prevalent theme—preoccupation with the past—Pamuk's novels are "full of speakers who reminisce at excessive length," notes Armbrust. In *The Black Book* (1990), for example, Pamuk offers the city of Istanbul as a representation of Turkey's "unseen and unwanted past," says Armbrust. For the novelist, the city represents a buried Ottoman past and the present can only be "redeemed" by the digging up and uncovering of that past.

### Works in Critical Context

Much controversy has surrounded Pamuk's work, in particular his recurring motif of once-powerful world players who become sandwiched between the ancient and modern, the Arabic world and Europe, and secular liberalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Yet, Pamuk's popularity soared with such works as *My Name Is Red*. Pamuk became his country's most famous writer, as well as a spokesperson on the international stage for human rights and the growing conflict between the Islamic world and democratic ideals, particularly in parts of the world where large Muslim immigrant communities arose. For this, he was often a target of censorship; more conservative elements objected to the fascination with the West evident in his fiction, while his liberal critics disapproved of the unfavorable light in which Turkey was often presented. When he was awarded the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, some viewed the Nobel committee's choice of Pamuk as a clear political statement on the question of cultural freedom in the twenty-first century. Pamuk responded by commenting that he cared far more for writing than for politics, conceding, "I am essentially a literary man who has fallen into a political situation."

***My Name Is Red* (1998)** The story is set in sixteenth-century Turkey over a nine-day period, when a group of artists have gathered at the Sultan's palace. The ruler has commissioned them to illustrate his laudatory biography, but their task presents an unusual challenge, because Islam prohibits direct representation of the visual world. The plot is driven by a pair of murders that occur during their seclusion and told through a series of shifting

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pamuk's famous contemporaries include:

**Tony Blair** (1953–): The British prime minister from 1997 to 2007, Blair was also the leader of the Labour Party from 1994 to 2007, and a member of Parliament for Sedgefield from 1983 to 2007.

**Carol Ann Duffy** (1955–): Scottish-born playwright and poet known for her social critiques and feminist perspective.

**Arundhati Roy** (1961–): An Indian novelist and activist, Roy has won such awards as the 1997 Booker Prize and the 2002 Lannan Cultural Freedom Prize.

**Jerry Seinfeld** (1954–): Seinfeld is an award-winning American comedian, actor, and comic writer whose television show, *Seinfeld*, was named by *TV Guide* as "the greatest American television program of all time."

narrative voices, including a horse, a corpse, and even a coin.

In its original Turkish-language edition, *My Name Is Red* was not only another best seller, but the fastest-selling title in the history of Turkish literature. *New York Times* writer Richard Eder called it "by far the grandest and most astonishing contest in Pamuk's internal East-West war.... Readers will have spells of feeling lost and miserable in a deliberate unreliability that so mirrors its subject: a world governed by fog."

### Responses to Literature

1. Authors and other professionals take serious consideration of the past: some regard it as a phenomenon to be used for learning important lessons; others see it as that which must be forgotten. Consider the following list of quotes about the past. Choose one that you find striking and interpret it in a brief, one-page essay: what is the speaker suggesting about the past? How does this compare with Pamuk's philosophies as shown in his work?

Wendell Berry: The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it.

Jan Glidewell: You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present.

Pliny the Elder: God has no power over the past except to cover it with oblivion.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Scholar Walter Armbrust writes that "For Pamuk . . . , to look back at the past is not necessarily to repeat the past's mistakes—it is, in fact, the only way forward." Here are a few works by writers who also wrote with concerns for the past:

*Hunger of Memory* (2004), an autobiography by Richard Rodriguez. In this nonfiction work, the author revisits his Mexican American background experiences, particularly in American Catholic schools.

*Nisei Daughter* (1979), an autobiography by Monica Itoi Sone. In this tender and often humorous account, Japanese American author Sone revisits her days before and during World War II as a resident of Seattle and as an internment camp evacuee.

*Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927), a series of novels by Marcel Proust. In these seven autobiographical volumes, which the author spent his life writing, the past is a binding element.

*A Sketch of the Past* (1939), an essay by Virginia Woolf. In this piece, the author revisits several disturbing memories.

Carl Sagan: You have to know the past to understand the present.

Oscar Wilde: The one charm of the past is that it is the past.

Virginia Woolf: Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart and his friends can only read the title.

2. Most of Pamuk's works are set in his native Turkey. Choose one of Pamuk's works to focus on and write an essay that considers the following questions: How does Pamuk use Turkey in that particular text? That is, how does the setting contribute to the story line? Does his portrayal of the country help characterize the people? How does the use of Turkey contribute to the theme? How much more does a reader know about Turkey after reading a Pamuk work?
3. It might be said that use of such a thorough and repeated setting is Pamuk's way of paying tribute to his native country. Write your own tribute to your country: in either a poem, essay, or short story, highlight the place's best features by describing it using sensory details. What are the familiar (or seasonal) smells? What sounds might your reader find striking? What colors, textures, and other sight details would help you pay homage to your country?
4. In works such as *The Black Book* (1994), Pamuk blurs the line between fantasy and the realism common to

other novelists of his time and country. This particular style distinguished him from the other authors and also made him popular with readers. In a team effort with a group of your classmates, research both realism and fantasy to come up with a working definition of Pamuk's style. What are the characteristics of realism? What are the characteristics of fantasy? How do the two come together (overlap) to create the hybrid genre Pamuk writes? What might this combined style be called?

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## Nicanor Parra

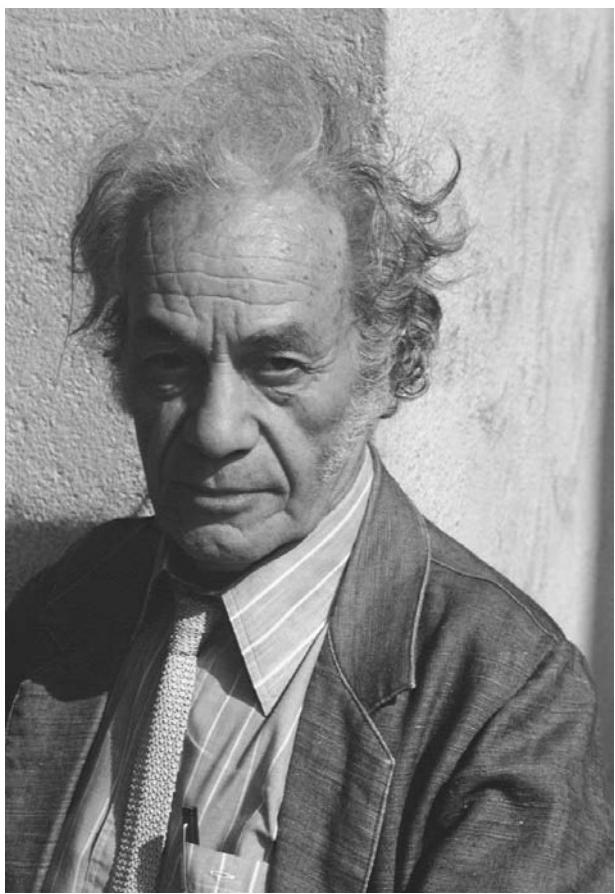
BORN: 1914, Chillán, Chile

NATIONALITY: Chilean

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Poems and Antipoems* (1954)



Nicanor Parra © Bassouls Sophie / CORBIS SYGMA

*Manifesto* (1963)  
*Emergency Poems* (1972)  
*Artifacts* (1972)  
*Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui* (1977)

## Overview

Chilean writer Nicanor Parra is known for humorous, satirical verse that has been labeled “antipoetry,” a poetic form that is irreverent and nonsymbolic in reflecting the fragmented state of modern society. In Parra’s opinion, the appropriate subject matter of poetry is not truth and beauty, but the vulgar surprises of life that, more often than not, amount to a bad joke. Through antipoetry, Parra relates the ironies of life in ordinary speech, making colorful, witty insights into the unpretentious characters he presents. In doing so, Parra aims to show that poetry belongs to everyone, not to an elite group of intellectuals.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Birth of an Antipoet** Parra was born in southern Chile near the small town of Chillán on September 15,

1914, to Nicanor P. Parra, a teacher, and Clara S. Navarrete Parra. Throughout his youth and early education Parra considered himself both a poet and a student of science. In 1932 Parra went to Santiago, where he completed his final year of high school at the Internado Barros Arana (Barros Arana Boarding School). There he became acquainted with the school’s leading intellectuals—Jorge Millas, Luis Oyarzún, and Carlos Pedraza—and resumed writing poetry. Parra’s school friends, who later formed the nucleus of the group of prominent writers and artists of his generation, introduced him to current trends in Chilean, European, and North American culture and literature, including surrealism. The following year, Parra enrolled in the Instituto Pedagógico (Pedagogical Institute) at the University of Chile in Santiago, where he majored in mathematics and physics while training to become a teacher.

**Following in His Father’s Footsteps** As a university student Parra continued to associate with his boarding-school friends, and together, in 1935, they began publishing a literary magazine with a limited circulation, *Revista Nueva* (New Review). Parra contributed a short story, “Gato en el camino” (Cat in the Road), to the first issue and two years later published his first collection of poems, *Cancionero sin nombre* (1937, Untitled Songbook), a work that brought him national attention. Although the book was awarded the Premio Municipal de Poesía (Municipal Poetry Prize) for 1938, it received, like much of Parra’s work, mixed critical reviews. In 1938, Parra graduated from college with a degree in mathematics and physics and spent the following six years teaching high school in Chillán.

**Higher Education Brings Exposure to Western Literature** During the 1940s, Parra continued his education in both science and literature while living abroad in the developed world. After six years of high-school teaching, he decided to pursue graduate study in physics at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, from 1943 to 1945. Later, from 1949 to 1951, he studied cosmology at Oxford University. While in the United States and England, Parra became an admirer of North American and British writers who incorporated everyday language and colloquial expressions in their poetic commentary on politics, manners, religion, and society.

**Antipoetry Attracts National Attention** When Parra returned to Chile in 1945, he joined the faculty at the University of Chile. In 1948, he was appointed the director of the school of engineering at the university, and four years later he was named professor of theoretical physics. In 1954, the work that brought him wide critical acclaim, *Poems and Antipoems* was published. Basically viewed as pessimistic, *Poems and Antipoems* satirizes political systems and social structures that, in Parra’s view, prevent humankind from transcending their own tragic

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Parra's famous contemporaries include:

**Italo Calvino** (1923–1985): Italian postmodernist writer who works, such as the short story collection *Cosmomics* (1965), reveal a fascination with science and mathematics.

**Rachel Carson** (1907–1964): An American marine biologist and early environmental activist famous for her 1962 book *Silent Spring*.

**Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973): Renowned Chilean poet and diplomat, and winner of the 1971 Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Nelson Mandela** (1918–): An antiapartheid activist in his early career, Mandela served as the South African president from 1994 until 1999.

history. Appearing in 1962, Parra's *Versos de salón* (Salon Verses) retained a pessimistic view of life, with an added element of hope, expressed in his admonition, “try to be happy.” *Sermones y predicas del Cristo de Elqui* (Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui) followed in 1977. In it Parra utilizes folk-legends to demythologize Chilean prophets and other religious figures, permitting the reader to recognize that people or objects traditionally considered sacred are not, and that both often mask the realities of life.

**Writing in Defense of the Environment** During the 1980s and 1990s, Parra published no fewer than ten books of poetry in which he continues to blend a prophetic tone with sociopolitical examination. Rather than rest on his laurels, Parra has persevered with his goal of poetic renovation through ongoing experimentation with new forms, and during the 1980s began writing in defense of the environment and treating ecological themes in his *Ecopoemas* (Ecopoems; 1982). In these poems Parra shows his solidarity with nature and the universe. For example, in an untitled poem from this collection, he chides humanity for contaminating the earth. In *Hojas de Parra* (1985; Leaves [Pages] of Parra), Parra humorously addresses the subject of death—both literally, as in physical death, and metaphorically, as in political death—as he reflects on Chile’s dictatorship. From 1974 until 1990, Chile was ruled by the military dictator Augusto Pinochet Ugarte; his rule was marked by violent suppressions of political opposition and human rights violations, for which he was ultimately arrested and tried.

*Hojas de Parra* is the only work of Parra’s that has been staged as a theater piece. His more recent works include, *Poemas para combatir la calvicie* (1993; Poems to Fight Baldness), *Páginas en blanco* (2001; Blank

Pages), *Lear Rey & Mendigo* (2004; Lear, King & Beggar), *Obras completas I & algo +* (2006; Complete Works & Something +), and *Discursos de Sobremesa* (2006; After-Dinner Discourses).

**Accolades in Spite of Controversy** In spite of the controversial nature of his poetry, and the few translations made available to English-speaking readers, Parra has been widely honored for his work. The list of awards he has received includes the Writers Union Prize in 1954 for *Poems and Antipoems*, a Guggenheim fellowship in 1972 for *Emergency Poems* (1972), the American Translators Association and University of Missouri Press award in 1984 for *Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui*, and the Juan Rulfo Prize in 1990. Parra has been nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature several times but has not yet received the award.

In addition to teaching science and engineering, Parra’s accomplishments in writing have earned him invitations to serve as visiting professor of Spanish American literature at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge (1966–1967), and at New York University, Columbia University, and Yale University (1971). Parra has given poetry readings and lectures in many countries and conducts poetry workshops at his home institution. He is also a member of the Academia Chilena de la Lengua (Chilean Academy of Language). He has been married twice—to Ana Troncoso and Inga Palmen—and has seven children. He presently resides in La Reina, a suburb of Santiago.

### Works in Literary Context

While in the United States and England, Parra became an admirer of North American and British writers who incorporated prosaic language and colloquial expressions in their poetic commentary on politics, manners, religion, and society. He was most influenced by his readings of British poets W. H. Auden, William Blake, C. Day-Lewis, John Donne, T. S. Eliot, Louis McNeice, Ezra Pound, and Stephen Spender. In addition, Parra read Walt Whitman in Spanish translation and, under his influence in 1943, wrote a series of twenty poems, “Ejercicios retóricos” (Rhetorical Exercises), which were published eleven years later in the Chilean magazine *Extremo Sur* (Extreme South). The factor that perhaps shaped his personal aesthetic the most, however, was writing in the shadow of his friend and fellow poet, the Nobel Prize winner Pablo Neruda.

Having inherited a poetic tradition of lofty themes in grandiose language, Parra adopted a radically divergent form and style of his own. Often compared with Neruda, Parra writes poems that differ in both style and scope. According to Emir Rodriguez Monegal in *The Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature* (1977), Parra became an antipoet “in order to negate the exalted conception of the poet that Neruda represented so grandly. The fact that he finally succeeded in creating a viable alternative confirms his unique gifts.” Through common language, bizarre images, and strong political themes, Parra

ultimately refined the art of writing antipoetry until he developed a kind of poem—‘artifact’—that is just as irreverent as antipoetry but marked by extreme minimalism.”

**Antipoetry** Parra made his feelings about poetry and its proper forms known in the text *Manifesto* (1963). In this work, the title of which alludes to past literary pronouncements as well as to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Parra issues a public declaration of literary and sociopolitical beliefs. Juxtaposing past and present, this work declares what poetry should not be and proclaims the proposition of poetic renovation: “For our elders / Poetry was a luxury / But for us / It is an absolute necessity: / We cannot live without poetry.” Parra insists on the ordinariness and indispensability of poetry and compares the poet, who shapes commonplace language into accessible form, to a bricklayer: “We maintain / That the poet is not an alchemist / The poet is a man like everyone else / A bricklayer who builds his wall: / A builder of doors and windows. / We speak / In everyday language / We don’t believe in cabalistic signs.” Quite simply, in contrast to Romantic and avant-garde notions of a poet’s superiority, the antipoet is an average human being.

**Artifacts** Throughout the years, Parra’s antipoetry became more truncated and austere, until it assumed new form in *Artifacts* (1972). Parra had begun to experiment with this poetic structure as early as 1967, and from that time the artifact has been variously compared to slogan, haiku, and graffiti for its verbal compression, minimalism, and fragmentation. For Parra, artifacts are simplified linguistics that plainly state weighty ideas. Published as a set of picture postcards with illustrations by artist Guillermo Tejeda, *Artifacts* is both a literary and visual text, in the style of French avant-garde writer Guillaume Apollinaire’s visual poetry, or calligrams. Generally fewer than ten lines, Parra’s artifacts are characterized by detachment from poetic context, maximum verbal concentration, and incorporation of disparate styles of discourse, such as advertisements, popular sayings, newspaper headlines, and political slogans.

The term “artifact” suggests an anthropological document or record of human social and cultural development. Appropriately, Parra’s critical eye is once again trained on societal defects in *Artifacts*. From a nonideological stance, he condemns all forms of large government equally. In “U.S.A.,” for instance, Parra criticizes the weaknesses of democracy in a country “where liberty / is a statue.” Likewise, he takes a dim view of Cuban socialism: “If Fidel were fair about it / he’d believe in me / just as I believe in him: / History will absolve me.”

Parra has influenced his own and subsequent generations of Spanish American writers, and his work has been translated into all major languages, including English, notably by North American beatnik poets—such as Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti—with whose work his has been compared.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In many of his antipoems, Parra engages in iconoclasm, or the deliberate destruction of sacred ideas and figures and, for Parra, the beliefs surrounding these figures. For example, in *Sermons and Homilies of the Christ of Elqui*, Parra represents a popular Chilean “prophet” as a regular, perhaps vulgar person, suggesting that there is nothing about the man that is holier than anyone else. Other artists have engaged in similar kinds of iconoclasm. Here are a few examples:

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885), a philosophical work of nonfiction by Friedrich Nietzsche. In this text, as in many other writings of Nietzsche’s, the philosopher claims that “God is dead,” undermining many popular beliefs about God, particularly his infiniteness.

*The Life of Brian* (1979), a film directed and performed by the Monty Python comedy team. In this comedy, a young Jew named Brian Cohen, born in the same time and place as Jesus, is mistaken for the Messiah.

*A People’s History of the United States* (1980), a history book by Howard Zinn. In this controversial work, Professor Zinn provides a shocking challenge to the conventionally taught narrative of American history.

## Works in Critical Context

Parra’s iconoclastic approach to traditional poetry techniques, his biting satire, as well as his peculiar brand of humor, have encouraged various critical viewpoints. Many commentators point to what they term postmodern elements in Parra’s poems as a key to understanding his antipoetry, arguing that his unorthodox style successfully addresses the realities of a fragmented universe and the chaotic pace of contemporary life. Conservative scholars, however, reject Parra’s irreverent, disjointed imagery, which they assert conveys an overly pessimistic and anarchistic impression of life.

**Antipoetry Sparks Controversy: Versos de salón** Owing to its provocative nature, antipoetry often sparked fierce reactions. *Versos de salón* was one such work. Capuchin priest Father Prudencio Salvatierra condemned this collection in a November 15, 1964, review in the conservative newspaper *The Illustrated Daily*: “Can a work like this, with neither head nor tail, that exudes poison and rottenness, madness and Satanism, be released to the public? . . . I cannot provide examples of antipoetry here: it is too cynical and demented. . . . They have asked me if this book is immoral. I would say not; it is too dirty to be immoral. A garbage can is not immoral, no matter how many times we walk around it trying to figure out what’s inside.” Equally as passionate in response, was Neruda; however, his response was one of excitement and approval.

The poetry in *Versos de salón*, Neruda said, “is as delightful as the gilded tint of early morning or fruit ripened to perfection in the shadows.” Clearly, Parra managed to evoke visions of both heaven and hell in the same work.

Certainly Neruda is not the only reader to praise Parra’s work. In his *New York Times Book Review* piece about *Poems and Antipoems*, Mark Strand comments, “Parra’s poems are hallucinatory and violent, and at the same time factual. The well-timed disclosure of events—personal or political—gives his poems a cumulative, mounting energy and power that we have come to expect from only the best fiction.” In a *Poetry* review, Hayden Carruth adds: “Free, witty, satirical, intelligent, often unexpected (without quite being surrealistic), mordant and comic by turns, always rebellious, always irreverent—it is all these and an ingratiating poetry too.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Read *Versos de salón* while considering Father Prudencio Salvatierra’s evaluation of the text—that it is, essentially, the literary equivalent of a garbage can. Do you agree with Salvatierra’s assessment that the text “exudes poison and rottenness, madness and Satanism”?
2. In *Artifacts*, Parra criticizes the democracy of the United States, “where liberty / is a statue.” What do you think Parra means by this statement? Evaluate this claim. Do you agree with it? Do you disagree? Why?
3. After reading Parra’s *Artifacts*, choose a subject—a person, place, or object—that you have strong feelings about and attempt to write a few “artifacts” about your subject.
4. Compare Parra’s version of iconoclasm with the iconoclasm presented in the “Lisa the Iconoclast” episode of *The Simpsons*. Who is the target of each of these iconoclastic texts? Do you think that there are larger implications for each of these instances of iconoclasm? What might they be?

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## Pier Paolo Pasolini

BORN: 1922, Bologna, Italy

DIED: 1975, Ostia, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

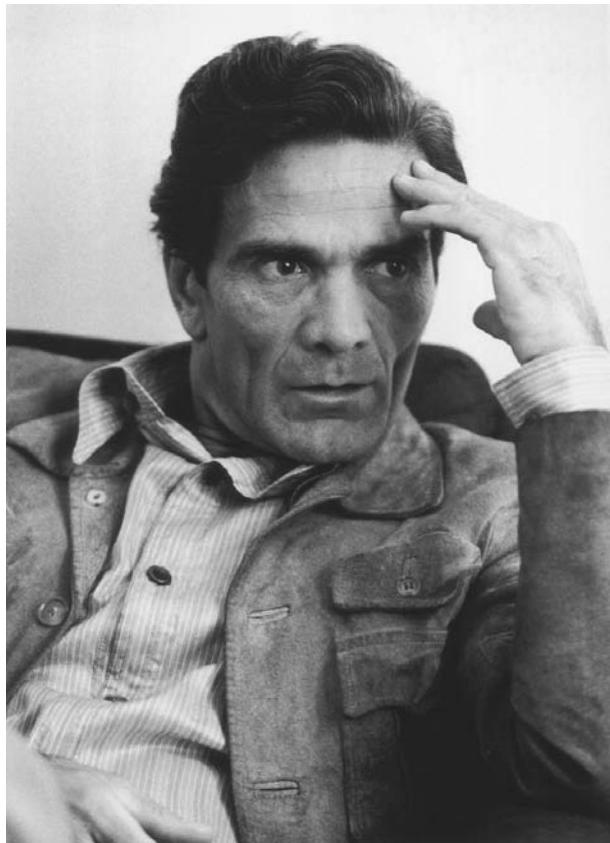
*Poesie a Casarsa* (1942)

*The Ragazzi* (1955)

*A Violent Life* (1958)

## Overview

Pier Paolo Pasolini is best known throughout the world primarily for his films, many of which are based on literary works, such as *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales*. In his native Italy, however, Pasolini is recognized as a complex artist: a celebrated novelist, poet, and critic as well as a filmmaker. As one of the most influential and controversial writers of his generation, Pasolini produced both literary and cinematic art that reflects his empathy for the poor, his religious conviction, and his involvement in nonconformist politics.



Pier Pasolini Evening Standard / Hulton Archive / Getty Images

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Child of Casarsa** Pasolini was born March 5, 1922, in Bologna, Italy. His childhood and early adult experiences in the poverty-stricken village of Casarsa, located in the province of Friuli, forever linked him to the poor, inspiring sympathies that would later emerge in his writing. In addition to the plight of the people there, Pasolini was influenced by the dialect spoken in that region, as evidenced by his early poetry.

In 1937, Pasolini attended the University of Bologna, where he studied art history and literature and began publishing articles in *Architrave*, a student politico-literary journal. At his own expense, he published his first collection of poetry, *Poesie a Casarsa*, in 1942. These poems reveal a deep love for the Friulian language, landscape, and peasants that had so shaped his childhood.

**Political Affiliations** Pasolini grew up at a time when Fascism was the rule of law in Italy. Fascism is characterized by intense nationalism over other interests—including individual rights—as well as a strong military state and an authoritarian leader, who controls the government with little opposition by a legislature or parliament. In Italy, this leader was Benito Mussolini, who ultimately joined Hitler and his Nazi forces as part of the Axis Powers during World War II. Pasolini was drafted as a reluctant soldier during this time.

Relieved of his duties after only a week of military service in 1943, Pasolini fell under the influence of the ideas of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, the leading voice of Italian communism at the time. Communism emphasizes the importance of workers's rights and the sharing of wealth and resources among productive members of society. From 1943 to 1949, while teaching at a public school, Pasolini dedicated himself to intellectual and artistic pursuits, writing and publishing poetry in the Friulian dialect with the hope of creating a literature accessible to the poor. Pasolini's writing became his form of protest and resistance against Nazism and Fascism, as well as a rejection of the official language of Italy, which he believed had been created by and for the bourgeoisie. In 1949, after being arrested for his involvement in a homosexual relationship, Pasolini lost his teaching position and was expelled from the Italian Communist Party. Seeking to escape the scandal, Pasolini and his mother moved to Rome, where he became immersed in the city's slum life, all the while documenting the depravity of that lifestyle in poetry and such novels as *A Violent Life*.

In 1957's *The Ashes of Gramsci*, Pasolini returned to ideological debate. After being inspired by a visit to the grave of Gramsci, Pasolini wrote a meditation of passion and ideology that neither embraces nor challenges Marxism: While he accepted the rational arguments of Gramsci, Pasolini was tormented by his simultaneous attraction to and revulsion for the world around him. Instead of coming to a resolution, Pasolini establishes a tension between the movements of history and individual desire.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pasolini's famous contemporaries include:

**Akio Morita** (1921–1999): Morita founded Sony, the Japanese electronics company that built the first transistor radio, the Walkman portable cassette player, and the 3.5-inch floppy disk.

**Arthur C. Clarke** (1917–2008): In 1945, this English science-fiction author, most famous for his novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, predicted worldwide communication using satellites.

**Robert Redford** (1931–): An Oscar-winning director as well as a legendary actor, Redford founded the Sundance Film Festival and Sundance Institute, an organization dedicated to the discovery and development of independent filmmakers.

**Allen Ginsberg** (1926–1997): Ginsberg, author of the notorious *Howl, and Other Poems* was an American Beat poet, a group of writers who detested middle-class values.

**Terence Rattigan** (1911–1977): The successful comedies by this English playwright are based on actual people and incidents.

**Nadine Gordimer** (1923–): Much of Gordimer's work deals with the moral and psychological tensions in a racially divided South Africa, her native country.

**John Bowen** (1924–): The work of this British novelist and playwright is noted for its complex and ambivalent human motives and behavior.

**Filmmaker** In addition to writing—especially scriptwriting—Pasolini worked as an actor in the 1950s and, in 1961, made his debut as a director with the film *Accatonne*, an adaption of his novel *A Violent Life*. For the next fourteen years, he made films in which he combined his socialist sensibilities with a profound, nondenominational spirituality. Most always controversial, his movies were often anti-Catholic and sexually explicit, and he was officially accused of blasphemy by the Catholic Church in 1962. As a director, he was known for constantly changing his style and artistic approach, using nonprofessional actors, avoiding many industry standards, and choosing his subject matter from classical legends, tragedies, political diatribes, and other unconventional sources.

**Mysterious Murder** Murdered by a young male prostitute, Pasolini was found on the morning of November 2, 1975, in the seaside resort of Ostia. Accounts of his death differ: Some sources say Pasolini was hit in the head with a board and then run over repeatedly with his own car; others say he was bludgeoned to death. Some people even believe that the killer was an assassin sent by one of Pasolini's political enemies.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One theme that recurs in Pier Paolo Pasolini's work is the belief that innocence is being corrupted by capitalism. Especially in the years after World War II, intellectuals have explored this idea in both fiction and nonfiction works. Listed below are examples of books that address materialism and innocence in capitalist societies:

*The Pearl* (1945), a novella by John Steinbeck. As Kino, the main character in this novel, seeks wealth and status via the pearl, he becomes a savage criminal, personifying the way ambition and greed destroy innocence in a materialistic, capitalistic society.

*Fighting Evil: Unsung Heroes in the Novels of Graham Greene* (1997), nonfiction by Haim Gordon. This book offers a discussion of the evils of capitalism in the works of Graham Greene and the thought of Thomas Hobbes. *The Innocent* (1990), a novel by Ian McEwan. Concerned with the postwar struggle between the political philosophies of communism and capitalism, this novel is also about deception, aggression, and the loss of innocence. *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (2004), a film by Chuan Lu. This film, based on a true story about Tibetan volunteers attempting to stop poachers from hunting endangered antelope, depicts the lure of capitalist influence in remote areas and shows how ideals can be affected by desperate circumstances.

### Works in Literary Context

Without a doubt, Pasolini's work was most inspired by the time he spent among the poverty stricken in Casarsa and in the slums of Rome. Stylistically, his poetry shows inspiration from several poets, including Giovanni Pascoli, the subject of Pasolini's thesis, and Eugenio Montale. Many of the poems in *Poesie a Casarsa*, Pasolini's earliest volume, are written in the terza rima form—a three-line stanza with the rhyme scheme *aba, bcb, cdc*, etc.—invented by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*.

**The Language of Art and Politics** Suggests writer Tony D'Arpino, "Pier Paolo Pasolini, poet, novelist, philosopher, and filmmaker, came of age during the reign of Italian fascism, and his art is inextricably bound to his politics." This opinion unites much of Pasolini's work, as he often employs his social and cultural ideologies as poetic inspiration and the basis for a new mythology. He resisted the "unreal, functional, unpoetic languages of the bourgeoisie," as Sam Rohdie notes, "the languages of reason, of modern society, of capitalism, of exploitation, of politics." Instead, Rohdie says, Pasolini attempted to capture the language of "the earthly real." Pasolini challenged what he called "practical politics"

with collages composed of what he viewed as true world realities: "language, gestures, faces, bodies." In a sense, Pasolini looked toward a "primitive world," at the same time addressing the artifice of the "bourgeois world."

**Slang in *The Ragazzi*** Based on Pasolini's experiences in the Roman slums, the highly controversial novel *The Ragazzi* tells the story of a group of young people whose poverty has driven them to a life of violence, crime, and indiscriminate sex. Pasolini, rejecting the formal official language of Italy, uses crude, obscene Roman street slang to create a shocking picture of Italian youth. In fact, although it avoids overt political implications, *The Ragazzi* is regarded as an indirect comment on the Italian establishment as a whole. Because of his harsh, explicit language, Pasolini angered many groups and was charged with obscenity, of which he was acquitted.

### Works in Critical Context

Critical reaction to Pasolini's work usually extends beyond its value as literature or film because of its inclination toward political and religious thought. Over the course of his career, his explorations of communism, Catholicism, and class struggles alternately pleased and angered conservatives and liberals alike. According to an essay by Joseph P. Consoli in *Gay and Lesbian Literature*, actor Stefano Casi said that "Pasolini was first a thinker, and then an artist," that despite the many genres in which Pasolini worked, "in reality only one definition can render with precision the area of cultural diligence attended to by Pasolini: intellectual." As a result, scholars look beyond the story itself for meanings and messages, often citing them as evidence for his position for or against a particular theory, practice, or political system.

**Poetry** Most critics agree that Pasolini's greatest contribution to literature is the creation of a "civic" poetry, verse that conveys the rational argument of a civilized mind. Intellectuals have considered Pasolini an "organic intellectual," a term first used by Gramsci to designate a militant intellectual who personally identified with the working class. Still, Pasolini's poetry is viewed by some as eluding historically established classification. While the intimate candor of Pasolini's poetry has been praised by some critics, others have found fault in his failure to resolve his internal struggles in his work, along with his inclination toward egocentrism and martyrdom.

**Adapting *Oedipus Rex*** In Pasolini's version, *Oedipus Rex* (1967) takes on the image of the Everyman and appeals to the ordinary person. Pasolini uses only the basic elements of the mythical hero and hones in on Oedipus's sense of alienation and fear. Pasolini's Oedipus lives in the 1930s, with a lower middle class Italian family. He unifies, as Kostas Myrsiades offered, "the ancient myth and Pasolini's own childhood," plus "the psychological relationship between Oedipus and all men who as children have rivaled their fathers for their mother's

affections." Audrène Eloit in *Language Film Quarterly* went further, calling the work a "palimpsest," which points to the layers of mythical retellings and adaptations of the Oedipus story originally written by Sophocles. Eloit also claims the film "turns into a map of the soul, a translation of the works of Freud and his successors," and thematically focuses on the debate between free will and fate in the context of psychoanalysis. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* suggests the film "contains somewhat more Pasolini than Sophocles" and praises the "modern, semi-autobiographical sequences" where the myth and author intersect. Most critics found the movie visually stunning and honored it with several awards, including the Best Foreign Language Film at the Kinema Jumbo Awards.

## Responses to Literature

1. Some scholars believe that Pasolini's poetry was influenced by both Dante and American poets. Read a selection of Pasolini's poetry. Write an essay describing what evidence you find of such influences.
2. Pasolini achieved fame in Italy with novels based on his experiences in the Roman slums and his impressions of urban poverty. Compile a list of five or more authors today who write about life in undesirable conditions. What genres do these works encompass? Do you think fiction or nonfiction is a more effective vehicle for describing such conditions?
3. Biographers often write about the innocence with which Pasolini viewed the world. However, his works, filled with obscenities and acts of violence, do not convey such an outlook. With a group of your classmates, discuss how you can reconcile Pasolini's worldview with his works. Why do you think an optimist in his real life would create such controversial films and literature?

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## Boris Pasternak

BORN: 1890, Moscow, Russia

DIED: 1960, Peredelkino, USSR.

NATIONALITY: Russian

GENRE: Fiction, Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

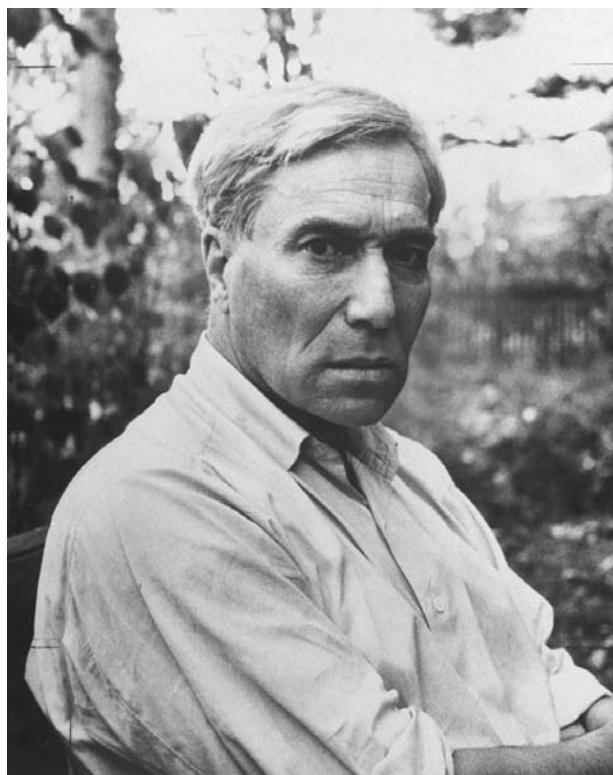
*Sister My Life: Summer, 1917* (1923)

*The Last Summer* (1934)

*Doctor Zhivago* (1956)

### Overview

Nobel laureate Boris Pasternak was regarded in his native Russia as one of the country's greatest postrevolutionary poets. He did not gain worldwide acclaim, however, until his only novel, *Doctor Zhivago*, was published in Europe in 1958, two years before the author's death. Banned in Russia as anti-Soviet, the controversial novel was hailed as a literary masterpiece by both American and European critics, but its publication was suppressed in Russia until 1988.



Boris Pasternak Jerry Cooke / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Childhood of High Culture** The son of an acclaimed artist and a concert pianist, both of Jewish descent, Pasternak benefited from a highly creative household that counted novelist Leo Tolstoy, composer Alexander Scriabin, and poet Rainer Maria Rilke among its visitors. In 1895, when Pasternak and his brother, Aleksandr, became gravely ill for a brief time, Pasternak's mother stopped playing music in public for ten years. Apparently, her decision to end her public concerts was a source of guilt for the children. Pasternak's image of his mother's sacrifice manifests itself throughout his work in the persistent theme of women and their difficult lot in life.

**Association with the Futurists** After spending six years studying music, Pasternak turned to philosophy, eventually enrolling in Germany's prestigious Marburg University. In 1912, however, Pasternak abruptly left Marburg when his childhood friend, Ida Vysotskaya, rejected his marriage proposal. Deciding to commit himself exclusively to poetry, he eventually joined Centrifuge, a moderate group of literary innovators associated with the Futurist movement. The Futurists advocated greater poetic freedom and attention to the actualities of modern life. Pasternak's first two poetry collections largely reflect these precepts as well as the influence of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Pasternak's close friend, who was among the most revered of the Futurist poets.

Pasternak was declared unfit for military service and spent the first years of World War I as a clerical worker. When news of political turmoil reached Pasternak in 1917, he returned to Moscow, but the capital's chaotic atmosphere forced him to leave for his family's summer home in the outlying countryside. There he composed *Sister My Life: Summer, 1917* (1923). Considered Pasternak's greatest poetic achievement, this volume celebrates nature as a creative force that permeates every aspect of human experience and impels all historical and personal change. Pasternak's next poetry collection, *Temi i variatsi* (1923), solidified his standing as a major modern poet in the Soviet Union. He also received critical acclaim with *Rasskazy* (1925), his first collection of short stories.

**Communism and the Avant-Garde** In 1923, enthusiastic about the possible artistic benefits of the Revolution, Pasternak joined Mayakovsky's Left Front of Art (LEF), an alliance between Futurist writers and the Communist Party that used the avant-garde movement's literary innovations to glorify the new social order. His works from this period, *Vysockaya bolezni* (1924), *Deviatsot piaty god* (1926), and *Lieutenant Schmidt* (1927), are epic poems that favorably portray events leading up to and surrounding the Marxist revolution of 1917. During the late 1920s, Pasternak grew disillusioned with the government's increasing social and artistic restrictions

as well as with Communism's collective ideal that, in his opinion, directly opposed the individualistic nature of humanity. He eventually broke with the LEF.

**Optimism Dashed** The following year, Pasternak divorced his first wife, Evgeniya Lurie, as a result of his affair with Zinaida Neigauz, whom he later married. Critics often cite this new relationship and the couple's friendships with several Georgian writers as the source of the revitalized poetry found in *Vtoroye rozhdenie* (1932). A collection of love lyrics and impressions of the Georgian countryside, *Vtoroye rozhdenie* presented Pasternak's newly simplified style and chronicled his attempt to reconcile his artistic and social responsibilities in a time of political upheaval. Pasternak's newfound optimism, however, was subdued following the inception of the Soviet Writers's Union, a government institution that abolished independent literary groups and promoted conformity to the ideals of socialist realism. Recognized as a major poet by the Communist regime, Pasternak participated in several official literary functions, including the First Congress of Writers in 1934. He gradually withdrew from public life, however, as Joseph Stalin's repressive policies intensified. He began translating the works of others, including the major tragedies of Shakespeare, rather than composing his own.

Following the publication of *Vtoroye rozhdenie*, Pasternak reissued several of his earlier poetry volumes under new titles. His new collections of verse, however, did not appear until World War II. *Na rannikh poezdakh* (1943) and *Zemnoy proster* (1945) reflect the renewed patriotic spirit and creative freedom fostered by the conflict, while eschewing conventional political rhetoric. Suppression of the arts resumed following the war, and many of Pasternak's friends and colleagues were imprisoned or executed. Pasternak, who had publicly condemned the actions of the government, escaped Stalin's purges of the intelligentsia. While some credit his translation and promotion of writers from Stalin's native Georgia, others report that the dictator, while glancing over Pasternak's dossier, wrote "Do not touch this cloud-dweller."

**Doctor Zhivago** During this dark era, he began work on what became his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. The exact year in which Pasternak started writing *Doctor Zhivago* is difficult to establish; scholars Evgenii Pasternak and V. M. Borisov approximate that the novel was started in the winter of 1917–1918. Drawn from Pasternak's personal experiences and beliefs, the novel utilizes complex symbols, imagery, and narrative techniques to depict Yury Zhivago, a poet and doctor who is caught up in and eventually destroyed by the Communist revolution of 1917. When Pasternak submitted *Doctor Zhivago* to Soviet publishers in 1956, they rejected the novel for what the editorial board of *Novy mir* termed its "spirit . . . of non-acceptance of the socialist revolution." Pasternak then smuggled the manuscript to the West, where reviewers

hailed the novel as an incisive and moving condemnation of Communism.

**The Nobel Prize Debacle** In 1959, the Swedish Academy selected Pasternak for the Nobel Prize in Literature, citing his achievements as both a poet and novelist. Nevertheless, the implication that the award had been given solely for *Doctor Zhivago* launched a bitter Soviet campaign against Pasternak that ultimately forced him to decline the prize. Despite his decision, the Soviet Writers' Union expelled Pasternak from its ranks, and one Communist Party member characterized the author as a "literary whore" in the employ of Western authorities.

Pasternak published two more works outside the Soviet Union, *When Skies Clear* (1959), a volume of reflective verse, and *Remember* (1959), an autobiographical sketch, before his death in 1960. At his funeral, Pasternak was not accorded the official ceremonies normally provided for the death of a member of the Soviet Writers' Union. Though his funeral was not announced in the official papers, thousands accompanied his family to the grave site, which remains a place of pilgrimage in Russia. In 1987, under the auspices of Communist leader Mikail Gorbachev's policy of social reform, the Writer's Union formally reinstated Pasternak, and in 1988, *Doctor Zhivago* was published in the Soviet Union for the first time.

## Works in Literary Context

Pasternak's work has an overwhelming and ever-present tendency to penetrate the essential reality of life, whether it is in art, in human relations, or in history. His approach—which consciously avoids everything formal and scholastic—can be termed "existential" in the broadest sense of the term, as a concern with the fundamental problems of existence rather than with systems or ideologies.

**Poetry Both Clear and Obscure** Though Pasternak won the Nobel Prize in 1959 for his novel, the Nobel committee first noted his outstanding achievements in verse. He was cited "for his important achievement both in contemporary lyrical poetry and in the great Russian epic tradition." Pasternak's mastery of verse was evident in his first complete book of poetry, *Twin in the Clouds* (1914). This collection reveals a voice of startling originality and, from the point of view of Pasternak's poetic predecessors, some eccentricity. His verse mixes stylistic registers and introduces colloquialisms, dialect, rarely used words, technical words, and foreign words—even in rhyme. Pasternak's critical reassessment of his own writings prompted him in 1928 to revise many of the poems from his first two books. He tried to shed them of "romantic" elements, including foreign words, openly autobiographical references, and hyperbolic intonation.

**Pasternak's Clear Vision of Doctor Zhivago** Pasternak did not write *Doctor Zhivago* for what he called

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pasternak's famous contemporaries include:

**Vladimir Mayakovsky** (1893–1930): Mayakovsky was a widely read and respected Russian Futurist poet and political agitator and became the archetypal Soviet poet after his death, when Stalin praised his work.

**H. P. Lovecraft** (1890–1937): Although his short stories of cosmic horror had only a niche following among enthusiasts of "weird fiction" during his lifetime, Lovecraft's modern take on horror would prove hugely influential with later writers of the supernatural.

**Raymond Chandler** (1888–1959): Along with Dashiell Hammett, Chandler was the premiere author of "hard-boiled" detective fiction for over two decades. His detective, Philip Marlowe, is perhaps the archetypal private eye.

**Anna Akhmatova** (1889–1966): Poetically outspoken, Akhmatova's work was often not allowed to be published by the Soviet regime. Her writings circulated via underground networks, and during World War II her patriotic poems inspired her countrymen to fight on. After Stalin's death, Soviet leadership grudgingly acknowledged her place among twentieth century Russian poets.

**Agatha Christie** (1890–1976): The pen name of Dame Agatha Miller, Christie is the most successful modern author, second only to Shakespeare in terms of volumes sold and breadth of readership. Her 80 mystery novels, especially those featuring her iconic characters Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, have been translated into dozens of languages and adapted time and again for stage and screen.

**Joseph Stalin** (1879–1953): From Vladimir Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin ruthlessly consolidated power and became the de facto dictator of the Soviet Union until his own death. His decades as the USSR's leader were marked by political purges on a massive scale, forced deportations, accelerated industrial programs, collectivization of agriculture, and the defeat of Nazi Germany. A cult of personality centered on Stalin extolled him as the savior of the Soviet Union.

"contemporary press." He wanted to create something that would slip beneath the systemic control of writers and editors, to write something "riskier than usual" that would "break through to the public." With this novel, Pasternak wanted to elude censorship and reach truth; in *Doctor Zhivago*, "Everything is untangled, everything is named, simple, transparent, sad. Once again, afresh, in a new way, the most precious and important things, the earth and the sky, great warm feeling, the spirit of creation, life and death, have been delineated." With *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak believed he could show "life as it is."

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Pasternak often dwelled on the difficult lot for women in society. Other works that touch upon this theme include:

*The Second Sex* (1949), a nonfiction work by Simone de Beauvoir. Considered a landmark of feminist literature, this work examines the treatment and perception of women throughout history, particularly how they have been perceived as an aberration of the male sex.

*House of Mirth* (1905), a novel by Edith Wharton. The title is ironic, for this novel traces the downfall of an independent-minded woman in the stifling high society of America at the turn of the twentieth century.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a novel by Zora Neale Hurston. An important work for both African-American and women's literature, this novel traces the fate of a black woman living in Florida in the early years of the twentieth century, and her experiences throughout her three marriages.

### Works in Critical Context

While his complex, ethereal works often defy translation, Western critics laud Pasternak's synthesis of unconventional imagery and formalistic style as well as his vision of the individual's relationship to nature and history. C. M. Bowra asserted: "In a revolutionary age Pasternak [saw] beyond the disturbed surface of things to the powers behind it and found there an explanation of what really matters in the world. Through his unerring sense of poetry he has reached to wide issues and shown that the creative calling, with its efforts and its frustrations and its unanticipated triumphs, is, after all, something profoundly natural and closely related to the sources of life."

**Doctor Zhivago** Scholarship on *Doctor Zhivago* appeared entirely outside the Soviet Union until its 1988 publication in Russia. Some early Western studies criticized the novel for its lack of a logical progression of events, its inexplicable use of time, its unbelievable coincidences, and its single-minded language in which only variants of Pasternak's own voice are present. Evaluations of *Doctor Zhivago* often disagree as to the novel's importance. Several critics regarded its many coincidences and Pasternak's distortion of historical chronology and character development as technically flawed. Other commentators compared Pasternak's thorough portrayal of a vast and turbulent period to that of nineteenth-century Russian novelists, particularly Leo Tolstoy. Additionally, the major themes of the novel, often distilled in the poems attributed to the title character, have been the subject of extensive analysis. Through Zhivago, critics maintain, Pasternak realizes his vision of the artist as a Christ-like figure who bears witness to the tragedy of his

age even as it destroys him. This idea is often linked to Pasternak's contention that individual experience is capable of transcending the destructive forces of history. It is this concept, commentators assert, that gives *Doctor Zhivago* its enduring power. Marc Slonim observed: "In *Doctor Zhivago* man is shown in his individual essence, and his life is interpreted not as an illustration of historical events, but as a unique, wonderful adventure in its organic reality of sensations, thoughts, drives, instincts and strivings. This makes the book . . . a basically anti-political work, in so far as it treats politics as fleeting, unimportant, and extols the unchangeable fundamentals of human mind, emotion and creativity." In memoirs he kept during the mid-1960s, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier who suppressed the novel in 1956, concluded: "I regret that I had a hand in banning the book. We should have given readers an opportunity to reach their own verdict. By banning *Doctor Zhivago* we caused much harm to the Soviet Union."

**Sister My Life: Summer, 1917** Often uniting expansive, startling imagery with formal rhyme schemes, *Sister My Life: Summer, 1917* is marked by the spirit of the revolution and marks a synthesis of the principal poetic movements of early twentieth-century Russia, including the Futurists, the Acmeists, and the Imagists. De Mallac suggested that it was Pasternak's "sincere endeavor to apprehend the era's political turmoil, albeit in a peculiar mode of cosmic awareness." Robert Payne commented in *The Three Worlds of Boris Pasternak* that the author's "major achievement in poetry lay . . . in his power to sustain rich and varied moods which had never been explored before."

### Responses to Literature

1. The Nobel Prize for Literature is normally the most coveted award for any writer to achieve, yet for Pasternak it only served to increase his paranoia. With a group of classmates, discuss why you think this is. Why do you think only one other Russian author publicly congratulated him?
2. The character of Lara in *Dr. Zhivago* is subjected to pressures both internal and external. Write an essay in which you explore how her own emotional demons affect her, and how her inner turmoil differs from the stresses placed on her by external political forces.
3. With a classmate, research Stalin's rise to power and his totalitarian regime on the Internet or in your library. Create a report for the class in which you describe how Stalin's approach to personal and political freedom is reflected in the particular text by Pasternak's that you have read. Use examples from the text to support your ideas.
4. Write a 5–7-page essay on how you think Pasternak's background as a poet influenced his literary style in *Dr. Zhivago*. Use examples from the text, as well as from Pasternak's poetry, to support your ideas.

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## Alan Paton

BORN: 1903, Pietermaritzburg, Natal Province, South Africa

DIED: 1988, Durban, South Africa

NATIONALITY: South African

GENRE: Novels

MAJOR WORKS:

*Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948)

*The Land and People of South Africa* (1955)



Alan Paton Paton, Alan, photograph. AP Images.

*Towards the Mountain* (1980)

*Journey Continued: An Autobiography* (1988)

*Save the Beloved Country* (1989)

### Overview

Alan Stewart Paton was a South African writer and liberal leader. His novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* won him world acclaim for the insights it gave into South Africa's race problem. As Martin Tucker commented in *Africa in Modern Literature*, "Paton is the most important force in the literature of forgiveness and adjustment."

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

#### *Youth in Politically Charged British Colony*

Alan Stewart Paton (rhymes with Dayton) was born on January 11, 1903, in Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Province, a former British colony that is now part of the Republic of South Africa.

European immigration to South Africa began in 1652, much earlier than in other parts of Africa. Its mineral wealth made it a particularly attractive territory

for the British Empire, which established dominance there over the native black population and another white European population, the Boers (descendants of Dutch settlers), in a series of wars spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the time of Paton's birth, Great Britain had just cemented its power in the region after winning the second Boer War in 1902. The British fought the Boers for control of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The two states had been annexed by Great Britain after the First Boer War in 1877, but enjoyed limited self-government until the British decided to take complete control. The war was unpopular even in Britain, where the military's brutal actions in South Africa were viewed as naked imperialism. In 1910, the Union of South Africa became a dominion of Great Britain.

**Paton the Teacher** From 1919 to 1922, Paton attended the University of Natal, from which he graduated with degrees in science and education. At this time, Paton began writing poetry and drama. In 1925 he became the assistant master at the Ixopo High School and, in 1928, joined the staff of Pietermaritzburg College. Paton was appointed principal of the Diepkloof Reformatory in 1935. The Diepkloof Reformatory just outside Johannesburg, had been administered as a prison for delinquent youths from the slums rather than an institution for their rehabilitation. Paton insisted that this defeated the purpose of the reformatory. He introduced reforms that enabled some of the young to regain their self-respect. His granting of weekend leave was considered revolutionary. To the surprise of some of his colleagues, most of the boys returned at the end of their leave.

**The Rise of the Apartheid Government** Legal racial separation between the majority black population and the ruling white had existed to some degree since 1923, but in 1948, Boer-led political parties gained control of the government on the "apartheid" slogan that whites must remain masters of South Africa ("apartheid" means "apartness" in Afrikaans, the language of the Boer South African population). The new apartheid government systematically repressed and terrorized the majority black population until its downfall in 1994. Paton retired from government service in 1948 and devoted his life to writing, lecturing on the race question, and organizing the Liberal Party of South Africa in opposition to apartheid.

**Paton and his Controversial Best-Seller** It was in this environment that Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* was published. *Cry, the Beloved Country* made a tremendous impression outside South Africa and among the English-speaking citizens in the republic. The nationalist-minded Boers dismissed it as a piece of liberalistic sentimentalism. It caused only a minor stir in the black African community where Paton was criticized for using stereotypes in depicting his black African characters. He was accused of approaching the black African characters from white, patronizing perspectives. This projected

them either as the victims of violent and uncontrolled passions or as simple, credulous people who bore themselves with the humility of tamed savages in the presence of the white man.

**Formation of the Liberal Party of South Africa** *Cry, the Beloved Country* had called for peace and understanding between races, but to Paton and those who shared his views, it was not enough for white liberals to preach race conciliation; they had to involve themselves actively in opposition to apartheid. Early in the 1950s, he took part in the formation of the Liberal Association, which later became the Liberal Party of South Africa (SALP). He was elected its president in 1953 and remained in this position until the government enacted a law making the party illegal. The SALP welcomed South Africans of all races in its ranks and sought to establish an open society in which one's merit would fix the position of the individual in the life of the nation. It advocated non-violence and set out to collaborate with the black Africans' political organizations. Like most leaders of the SALP, Paton was criticized bitterly in the Afrikaans press for identifying himself with black Africans. The underlying fear was that he and his colleagues were creating potentially dangerous polarizations in the white community.

**Continued Literary and Politic Activity** During the 1950s and 1960s, SALF gained a substantial following among both blacks and whites. In 1960, the government declared the party illegal. Some of the party's leaders fled the country, while others were arrested and tried on conspiracy charges. Paton was spared arrest. The government did, however, seize his passport upon his return from New York where he accepted the Freedom House Award honoring his opposition to racism.

Paton continued writing during these tumultuous times, publishing the novel *Too Late, the Phalarope* in 1953 and the play *Sponono* in 1965. After a little less than ten years, the government returned Paton's passport. That made it possible for him to undertake a world tour (1971) during the course of which he was showered with honors in America and Europe.

Paton died of throat cancer on April 12, 1988, at his home outside Durban, shortly after completing *Journey Continued: An Autobiography*. He was mourned as one of South Africa's leading figures in the anti-apartheid movement. Shortly after his death, his widow, Anne (Hopkins) Paton, released a large portion of the contents of Paton's study for the establishment of The Alan Paton Centre on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal. The university set aside space for this permanent memorial to Paton for future generations of writers and activists.

## Works in Literary Context

In assessing Paton's work, Paton scholar Edward Callan compares the author to American poet Robert Frost. Paton's art, says Callan, "is related to South Africa as Robert Frost's is to New England. Both of these writers

work within the framework of an external landscape where they know all the flowers and shrubs, birds and animals by their familiar names. As observers of the human inhabitants of these landscapes, both writers recognize the profound aspirations of human personality; and both communicate their insights in language that is fresh and simple, yet vibrant with meaning."

**Protest Fiction** Because Paton was concerned primarily with racial injustice in South Africa, his work has come to be considered part of the tradition of protest fiction that includes the works of such writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852), Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906), and Richard Wright (*Native Son*, 1940). While there is no doubt that well-crafted protest novels can exert a huge impact on the public, critics tend to look down on protest fiction, even labeling it propaganda, because, they believe, the writer's art is subjugated by the writer's political message, and characters and plot tend to be less fully rounded than they are in other types of fiction. This point is debatable, but Paton's literary reputation has suffered somewhat because of his political focus.

### Works in Critical Context

Over an initial period of approximately fourteen years, Paton produced a body of work that critics first used to judge him as a writer. F. Charles Rooney in *Catholic World*, for one, lauded Paton's skill as a writer and pointed favorably to his unwillingness to moralize in his first books. "In *Too Late, the Phalarope*, wrote Rooney, "Tante Sophie ... becomes such a real person to the reader that there is never a question of sermonizing." In *Tales from a Troubled Land*, however, asserted Rooney, "Paton has unfortunately abandoned his story to profess his heart."

One of the earliest proponents of racial equality in his native South Africa, Paton came into the most favorable reviews, however, with his very first work, *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

**Cry, the Beloved Country** (1948) A landmark publication for its time, the novel follows the fate of a young black African, Absalom Kumalo, who, having murdered a white citizen, "cannot be judged justly without taking into account the environment that has partly shaped him," as Edmund Fuller writes in his book *Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing*. The environment in question is typified by the hostility and squalid living conditions facing most of South Africa's nonwhites, victims of South Africa's system of apartheid.

The novel won enthusiastic reviews from critics and elicited tears from readers. *Cry, the Beloved Country*, wrote Rooney, "is a great novel, but not because it speaks out against racial intolerance and its bitter effects. Rather, the haunting milieu of a civilization choking out its own vitality is evoked naturally and summons our compassion.... It is a great compliment to Paton's genius that he communicates both a story and a lasting impression without bristling, bitter anger."

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Paton's famous contemporaries include:

**Ella Josephine Baker** (1903–1946): Leading African-American civil rights activist who worked behind the scenes alongside Dr. Martin Luther King and several others.

**Sir Winston Churchill** (1874–1965): Twice prime minister of the United Kingdom, this statesman and acclaimed orator was also a Nobel Prize-winning author.

**Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): Famous expatriate writer whose name is synonymous with the Great American Novel.

**Todd Matshikiza** (1921–1968): South African jazz pianist, composer, and activist who was instrumental in apartheid resistance efforts and subsequently was banned (exiled) by the South African government.

"I have just finished a magnificent story," wrote Harold C. Gardiner in a 1948 review. As the novel took up complicated issues, and "reduced to these simple, almost fabular terms, it was intelligible and it made an impact," wrote Dennis Brutus in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*. "The emotional impact of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is achieved, first of all and most consistently, by Paton's stylistic understatement, by his use and reuse of a few simple, almost stilted, formal phrases," explained Myron Matlaw in *Arcadia*.

"Three artistic qualities of *Cry, the Beloved Country* combine to make it an original and unique work of art," Edward Callan notes in his study *Alan Paton*. "First, the poetic elements in the language of some of the characters; second, the lyric passages spoken from outside the action, like the well-known opening chapter; and third, the dramatic choral chapters that seem to break the sequence of the story for social commentary, but which in fact widen the horizon of the particular segments of action to embrace the whole land, as well as such universal concerns as fear, hate, and justice."

Yet as Carol Iannone noted in *American Scholar*, "[a]fter initial widespread adulation, critics began to find fault with *Cry, the Beloved Country*, seeing it as sentimental and propagandistic, more a treatise than a work of art. The novel tends to survive these objections, however, because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

### Responses to Literature

1. While reading *Cry, the Beloved Country* consider what it means to get a good night's sleep. What could interfere with that if you lived in a country where democracy did not rule?

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* highlights the many ways that the social and legal oppression of a racial or ethnic group harm both the oppressed and the oppressors. Other works that focus on this theme of oppression include:

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), by Frederick Douglass. Perhaps the most famous of the American slave narratives, Douglass's life story highlights how being a slave and owning slaves transforms people.

*Things Fall Apart* (1959), by Chinua Achebe. The story of colonialism and its invasive and destructive impact on Nigerian tribal culture.

*Once Were Warriors* (1990), by Alan Duff. Maori cultural struggles are closely examined in the setting of urban New Zealand and by way of the impoverished, under-educated Heke family.

*The Last Witchfinder: A Novel* (2006), by James Morrow. Morrow's inventive novel focuses on the enormously destructive witch hunts of the European middle ages and how this persecution affected the lives of millions of women.

2. After reading *Cry, the Beloved Country* consider the following passages and discuss the following related questions:

"Cry, the beloved country, for the unborn child that is the inheritor of our fear. Let him not love the earth too deeply. Let him not laugh too gladly when the water runs through his fingers, nor stand too silent when the setting sun makes red the veld with fire. Let him not be too moved when the birds of his land are singing, nor give too much of his heart to a mountain or a valley. For fear will rob him of all if he gives too much." What in this comment by the narrator about his home country do you find striking? What does the wording remind you of, if anything? Why does the narrator seem to suggest discouraging loving the earth, or laughing too loudly, or getting too emotional about the water and birds of South Africa?

- a. "Happy the eyes that can close." How does this comment by the narrator connect with peace or peace of mind?
- b. "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find we are turned to hating." What conflict does this comment by Reverend Msimangu point to?
- c. "Who indeed knows the secret of the earthly pilgrimage? Who indeed knows why there can

be comfort in a world of desolation?" What does Stephen Kumalo mean when he thinks this during his stay in Johannesburg? What is he trying to understand?

- d. "For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret." How do these final thoughts by Kumalo connect to his earlier thoughts? What do you interpret is the "secret"?

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## Octavio Paz

BORN: 1914, Mexico City, Mexico

DIED: 1998, Mexico City, Mexico

NATIONALITY: Mexican

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950)



Octavio Paz *Paz, Octavio, photograph. AP Images.*

*Sun Stone* (1957)  
*Blanco* (1967)  
*A Draft of Shadows* (1975)

## Overview

The intellectual body of work of Octavio Paz is one of the most extensive and important in the history of Latin America. He wrote more than twenty books of poetry (more than thirty if all editions of the books are considered) and as many book-length essays about such topics as literature, eroticism, politics, anthropology, and painting. Until his death, he fueled an intellectual passion that—through his essays and the magazines that he headed—turned him into an indispensable guide for several generations in the area of Spanish language. Not only with his poetry, but also with his prose, Paz renovated Spanish, thanks to his mastery of nuance, the communication between words, and the architecture of syntax.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Spanish Heritage** Paz was born in Mexico City. His mother's family had emigrated from Spain and his father's ancestors traced their heritage to early Mexican settlers and indigenous peoples. Paz's paternal grandfather was a journalist and political activist, and his father was an attorney who joined Emiliano Zapata's farmer-backed revolution in the early 1900s. During the Mexican Civil War, a conflict led by Francisco I against the dictator Porfirio Diaz, Paz's family lost their home and relocated

to a nearby suburb of Mexico City, where they lived under financially unstable conditions. Nonetheless, Paz received his secondary education at a French Catholic school and later attended the National University of Mexico. While in his late teens, he founded *Barrandal*, an avant-garde journal, and published his first volume of poems, *Luna silvestre* (1933). In 1937, he traveled to Spain, which was at the time in the middle of a civil war pitting the ultranationalist/fascist forces of General Francisco Franco against the forces supporting the Spanish Republic. The fascists won the war and Franco became the Spanish dictator until his death in 1975. Paz participated in several antifascist activities in Spain before moving on to France. In Paris, he became interested in surrealism, a highly influential literary and artistic movement dedicated to examining the irrational, paranormal, and subconscious aspects of the human mind.

**Disillusionment** Paz returned to Mexico from Europe in 1938, just as the continent was heading toward World War II. Paz spent the war in Mexico and the United States, traveling extensively. While in the United States he became influenced by the formal experiments of such modernist poets as William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens.

**Diplomacy and Literary Repute** Paz joined the Mexican diplomatic service in 1945 and was assigned to the Mexican embassy in Paris. While in France, he became reacquainted with the aesthetics of surrealism and the philosophy of existentialism, eventually favoring what he termed “the vital attitude” of surrealism. It was during this time he wrote *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, a collection of essays concerning the importance of loneliness as the core of human—and especially Mexican—identity. This book and *Sun Stone* (1957), a long poem generally considered his finest achievement in verse, established Paz's international literary reputation. Paz continued to travel extensively as a diplomat. He was named Mexican ambassador to India in 1962 and served in this position until 1968, when he resigned in protest following the killings of student demonstrators in Mexico City's Plaza of Three Cultures by government forces. Later editions of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* include an additional essay by Paz discussing this tragic event.

Paz continued to lecture and travel around the world. In 1987 Paz published *Arbol adentro*, his first collection of poetry in eleven years. In 1990, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died of cancer in 1998.

## Works in Literary Context

Paz was introduced to literature in his grandfather's personal library. Later, he read authors who influenced his work including Gerardo Diego, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Antonio Machado, and D. H. Lawrence. In addition, his philosophical stance was influenced by his exposure to the writings of David Rousset, André Breton, and Albert Camus. His works reflect his knowledge of the

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Paz's famous contemporaries include:

**J. R. R. Tolkien** (1892–1973): Oxford professor and fantasy author whose tales of Middle Earth—including *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—brought him widespread critical and popular acclaim.

**Frida Kahlo** (1907–1954): A Mexican painter and wife of muralist Diego Rivera, Kahlo's style was influenced by a combination of European surrealism and indigenous traditions. She was not widely recognized until after her death.

**Marilyn Monroe** (1926–1962): An iconic beauty of the mid-twentieth century, Monroe starred in classic films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *Some Like It Hot*.

**Joseph McCarthy** (1908–1957): In 1950, McCarthy was an obscure junior senator from Wisconsin when he began claiming that he had a list of Communists that had infested government agencies. The resulting hearings, as well as McCarthy's blustering, bullying demeanor, came to symbolize the anti-Communist hysteria of the time.

**George Balanchine** (1904–1983): Of Georgian descent, Russian choreographer Balanchine would prove a major influence on American ballet after his move to New York City in the 1930s. His productions of *The Nutcracker* every Christmas made the ballet a holiday tradition.

history, myths, and landscape of Mexico as well as his interest in surrealism, existentialism, romanticism, Eastern thought, and diverse political ideologies.

**Surrealism** In his early verse, Paz experiments with such diverse forms as the sonnet and free verse, reflecting his desire to renew and clarify Spanish language by lyrically evoking images and impressions. In many of these poems, Paz employs the surrealist technique of developing a series of related or unrelated images to emphasize sudden moments of perception, a particular emotional state, or a fusion of such polarities as dream and reality or life and death. According to Paz, surrealism is a “negation of the contemporary world and at the same time an attempt to substitute other values for those of democratic bourgeois society: eroticism, poetry, imagination, liberty, spiritual adventure, vision.” Topics of Paz’s formative verse include political and social issues, the brutality of war, and eroticism and love. *Eagle or Sun?* (1951), one of his most important early volumes, is a sequence of visionary prose poems concerning the past, present, and future of Mexico. *Selected Poems*, published in 1963, and *Early Poems: 1935–1955* (1973) contain representative compositions in Spanish and in English translation.

**Radical Diversity** The variety of forms and topics in Paz’s later poems mirror his diverse interests. *Blanco*

(1967), widely considered his most complex work, consists of three columns of verse arranged in a chapbook format that folds out into a long, single page. Each column develops four main themes relating to language, nature, and the means by which an individual analyzes and orders life. In *Ladera este: 1962–1968* (1968), Paz blends simple diction and complicated syntax to create poems that investigate Asian philosophy, religion, and art. In his long poem *A Draft of Shadows* (1975), Paz examines selfhood and memory by focusing on poignant personal moments in the manner of William Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem *The Prelude*.

**Influence** The influence of Paz is vast and continues to grow. Writers that have been influenced by Paz include but are certainly not limited to Samuel Beckett, Charles Tomlinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Mark Strand, and Mexican author Carlos Fuentes. The work of Paz continues to be translated into numerous languages, thus increasing the scope of his enduring influence.

### Works in Critical Context

Octavio Paz’s reputation as one of the greatest literary figures of Latin America in the twentieth century—and certainly Mexico’s most important writer at that time—rests on his extensive output. He wrote more than thirty collections of poetry over the course of fifty years. His essays almost equaled his poetry in quantity, thoughtfulness, and influence. The two categories of writing complement each other. As John M. Fein states in an essay titled “Toward Octavio Paz: A Reading of His Major Poems, 1957–1976,” “His success in diversified fields is heightened in the ways in which his essays and his poetry are complementary: the core of his creativity is a concern for language in general and for the poetic process in particular.” In other words, critics’ positive reaction to Paz’s poetry is brought to an even higher level by the fact that his poetry is based on sound principles enumerated in his nonfiction, particularly those regarding the use of language.

Because critical approval of Paz’s work is nearly universal, the only question that emerged when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990 was why it had taken so long. In his introduction to a volume about essays on the poet, Harold Bloom noted that giving him the prize was “one of the sounder choices,” alluding to the unusual degree of approval from literary critics around the world. As *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* summarized Paz’s career, “There is Spanish American poetry after Octavio Paz: generations of poets who reject his legacy, and others that continue his line of experimentation. Nevertheless, the imprint that Paz has given to the tradition as a whole will be with us for years to come.”

**The Labyrinth of Solitude** *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, in which Paz explores Mexican history, mythology, and social behavior, is his most famous prose work. According to Paz, modern Mexico and its people suffer

a collective identity crisis resulting from their mixed Indian and Spanish heritage, marginal association with Western cultural traditions, the influence of the United States, and a recurring cycle of war and isolation. While critics debated Paz's contention that this description also symbolizes the modern human condition, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* received widespread praise. Irving Howe commented: "This book roams through the phases of Mexican past and present seeking to define the outrages, violation and defeats that have left the Mexican personality fixed into a social mask of passive hauteur.... At once brilliant and sad, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* constitutes an elegy for a people martyred, perhaps destroyed by history. It is a central text of our time."

## Responses to Literature

1. Paz often addressed themes concerning the impact of the ancient native cultures of Mexico on twentieth-century Mexican culture and society. Read *Sun Stone*. In what ways does it reflect ancient Aztec beliefs?
2. In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz contends that humans are unique among living things for their awareness of their own loneliness. Do you agree? If possible, provide reasons to support your position based on your own firsthand experiences with animals.
3. One of the main ideas in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is that Mexican culture is a sort of orphan child of Spanish settlers and pre-Columbian societies such as the Aztecs. How do you think this is related to the feelings of solitude Paz mentions in the title?
4. Although Paz was born in Mexico City and died there, he spent many years in other countries and cultures around the world. Provide examples of how his exposure to other cultures—particularly European artists and Hinduism—influenced his writing.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Paz was strongly influenced by the French literary movement of the post–World War I era known as surrealism; his early poetry, particularly *Sun Stone*, incorporated surrealist elements. Here are some other works that focus on surrealist conventions or ideas:

*Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924), a nonfiction book by André Breton. Breton is the father of surrealism in literature; this text lays out the tenets of that movement that other authors would eagerly follow.

*Naked Lunch* (1959), a novel by William S. Burroughs. This story is about the world travels of a junkie, told in a weirdly disjointed narrative; Burroughs claimed it could be read in any order.

*The Capital of Pain* (1926), a poetry collection by Paul Éluard. This work is a seminal collection of surrealist poetry; the poems would inspire the landmark 1965 French film *Alphaville*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard.

*Thomas the Obscure* (1941), a novel by Maurice Blanchot. A philosopher primarily, Blanchot wrote this abstract, challenging novel over the course of nearly ten years.

*Publishers Weekly* (January 16, 1995): 444.  
*London Times* (June 8, 1989).

*Times Literary Supplement* (December 30, 1988–January 5, 1989): 1435.  
 —(July 24, 1992): 6.  
 —(August 2, 1996): 7.

## Okot p'Bitek

BORN: 1931, Gulu, Uganda

DIED: 1982, Kampala, Uganda

NATIONALITY: Ugandan

GENRE: Fiction, poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Are Your Teeth White? Then Laugh!* (1953)

*Song of Lawino: A Lament* (1966)

*Two Songs: Song of Prisoner and Song of Malaya* (1971)

### Overview

One of the best-known and most original voices in East African poetry, Okot p'Bitek helped redefine African literature by combining the oral tradition of the native Acholi people of Uganda with contemporary political themes. At the same time he emphasizes the form of Acholi songs, p'Bitek explores the conflict between

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

p'Bitek's famous contemporaries include:

**Zulu Sofola** (1935–): In addition to being Nigeria's first female playwright, Sofola achieved success as an accomplished musician, theater director, and professor.

**Gunpei Yokoi** (1941–1997): Yokoi was the head of a team at the Japanese company Nintendo, which created the Game Boy handheld gaming system.

**John Gardner** (1933–1982): An accomplished medieval scholar, this American novelist's most notable work is *Grendel* (1971), a retelling of the Old English *Beowulf* epic from the point of view of its main villain, the monster Grendel.

**Mu'ammar al-Gadhafi** (1942–): As Libya's head of state, al-Gadhafi expelled foreigners, closed British and American military bases, and supported international terrorism.

**David Malouf** (1934–): A prize-winning poet before publishing his first novel, Malouf uses vivid, sensuous descriptions and evocative settings in his works.

**Desmond Tutu** (1931–): Tutu, the first black Archbishop of Cape Town, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his efforts to unite people of all ethnicities in his country.

**Luisa Valenzuela** (1938–): The fiction of this Argentine writer deals with violence, political oppression, and cultural repression.

African and European cultures. In challenging the effects of colonialism and Christianity on Africa in his musical poetry, p'Bitek urges his countrymen to evaluate African society.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Inspired by Acholi Songs and Dances** Born in Gulu, Uganda in 1931, p'Bitek was exposed to the songs and ceremonial dances of the ancient Acholi, a grassland people of the Uganda-Sudan borders, at an early age. His father, a teacher, was a gifted storyteller, while his mother was an accomplished singer of Acholi songs. After studying at King's College in Budo, where he wrote and produced a full-length opera before graduating from the secondary school, p'Bitek published *Are Your Teeth White? Then Laugh!*, also known as *White Teeth*, at the age of twenty-two.

**Diverse Talents** In 1956, p'Bitek played on Uganda's national soccer team at the Olympic Games held in London and then remained in England to study at schools such as the Institute of Social Anthropology in

Oxford, where he presented his thesis on Acholi traditional songs, and University College, Wales. Returning to Uganda in 1964, p'Bitek assumed a teaching position in the sociology department at Makerere University College in Kampala. He was first recognized as a major voice in African literature with the publication of *Song of Lawino* two years later.

**Artistic Festivals** Named director of the Uganda National Theatre and Cultural Centre in 1966, p'Bitek soon founded the Gulu Arts Festival, a highly successful celebration of the traditional oral history, dance, and other arts of the Acholi people. After criticizing the government of Uganda under the rule of Prime Minister Milton Obote, p'Bitek was forced to resign his position in 1968, and he moved to Kenya, remaining there throughout the reign of notorious Uganda dictator Idi Amin. While in Kenya, p'Bitek both served as a professor in Nairobi and organized the Kisumu Arts Festival, which was attended by a large number of talented local artists and writers.

**Academic Career** Throughout his teaching career, p'Bitek was a frequent contributor to such journals as *Traditions*, his articles displaying a variety of intellectual interests and ranging from poems to anthropological essays to literary criticism. Focusing on translating African literature, p'Bitek published 1974's *The Horn of My Love*, a compilation of Acholi folk songs about death, ancient Acholi chiefs, love, and courtship. In 1978, the same year he left Nairobi for the University of Ife in Nigeria, he published *Hare and Hornbill*, a collection of folktales featuring both human and animal characters. After traveling as a visiting lecturer at various universities, including in Texas and Iowa, p'Bitek returned to Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, where he was a professor of creative writing until his death in 1982.

### Works in Literary Context

Praised as the first major East African poet to write in English, p'Bitek has influenced a number of other poets. According to scholar K. L. Goodwin, works such as *Song of Lawino* revealed an East African audience for volumes of poetry in English by a single author, thereby demonstrating that East African poetry could consist of more than the casual lyrics or graphic pieces that were typically published in anthologies or periodicals. As p'Bitek's work gained recognition as the unique voice of East Africa, other writers drew inspiration from it, including Ugandan novelist and poet Okello Oculi.

**Preserving the Past** Within the majority of p'Bitek's poetry and fiction is a plea to save Acholi cultural traditions from Western influences. Along with capturing the evolution of Acholi society and the expressiveness of Acholi song, p'Bitek urges East Africa to avoid succumbing to Western ideas of art. In *Song of Lawino*, for example, Lawino, an illiterate Ugandan housewife, bitterly

complains that Ocol, her university-educated husband, has rejected not only her, but also his own Acholi heritage in favor of more modern ways. Lawino criticizes Ocol's disdain for the African lifestyle, heralding her native civilization as beautiful, meaningful, and satisfying. Through the character of Lawino, who realizes that African society is quickly moving away from its historical and cultural roots, p'Bitek issues a warning for his countrymen not to forget their heritage.

**A World Voice** Though p'Bitek believed Uganda should be the core of literature and drama in his homeland, his work spoke to a more universal reader. Edward Blishen, in the 1971 introduction to *Song of a Prisoner*, calls p'Bitek "a master of writing for the human voice—and sometimes, I suspect, for the animal or insect voice, too." Blishen goes on to say that *Song of Lawino* "is a poem about the situation in which we all find ourselves, being dragged away from all our roots at an ever-quickenning rate." Bahadur Tejani points out p'Bitek's way of encompassing more than a specific people in Africa; Tejani, in speaking about a particular section in *Song of Malaya*, says that "the malaya's song is for everyone. The sailor coming ashore with 'a time bomb pulsating' in his loin, the released detainee with 'granaries full to overflow,' the debauching Sikhs at the nightclubs with heads broken open, and the vegetarian Indian 'breeding like a rat'.... Okot's merciless satire takes toll of a whole humanity[.]". Tejani suggests that, as shown in *Song of a Prisoner*, p'Bitek's message is one that readers can all understand: "[A]t least if we can't have social and political justice, let's have the freedom of spirit to sing and dance."

### Works in Critical Context

Both p'Bitek's poetry and academic works have sparked debate among scholars. Because he condemns a blind acceptance of Westernization and, to a certain degree, modernization, p'Bitek has evoked negative analysis from Western critics. He has been criticized by British reviewers for what they view as his extreme Africanism and nationalism. Furthermore, feminist critics have opposed p'Bitek's one-dimensional, often satirical portrayal of African women.

**The Songs** While some critics have focused on the musical qualities of p'Bitek's poetry, most academics address p'Bitek's concern with the social and political themes of freedom, justice, and morality. For example, *Song of Malaya* ("malaya" translates as "whore") attacks society's basic ideas of good and bad. Bahadur Tejani describes the work as "one of the most daring challenges to society from the malaya's own mouth, to see if we can stand up to her rigorous scrutiny of ourselves."

Written after the death of his friend, politician Tom Mboya, p'Bitek's *Song of a Prisoner* details a cynical search for justice. In the introduction to *Song of a Prisoner*, Edward Blishen notes that p'Bitek's poetry is musical and entertaining even as it expresses the agony of his

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In the preface to the essay collection *Africa's Cultural Revolution*, p'Bitek writes, "Africa must re-examine herself critically. She must discover her true self, and rid herself of all 'apemanship.' For only then can she begin to develop a culture of her own. . . . As she has broken the political bondage of colonialism, she must continue the economic and cultural revolution until she refuses to be led by the nose by foreigners." Such concern for the preservation of African culture from the invasion of Western influences is evident throughout p'Bitek's works. Other works that explore the clash between two cultures include the following:

*Orphan* (1968), a poetry collection by Okello Oculi.

Through allegory, this work addresses the modern African social and political situations within a framework of traditional village wisdom.

*The Joy Luck Club* (1989), a novel by Amy Tan. Composed of four sections with four narrators in each section, Tan's novel expresses the conflicts between Chinese immigrant mothers and their Americanized daughters.

*House Made of Dawn* (1952), a novel by Scott Momaday. Caught between two worlds—life on his reservation and American industrialized society—the main character in this novel embodies the Native Americans' struggle to assimilate standards of the white culture into their heritage.

*American Son: A Novel* (2001), a novel by Brian Ascalon Raley. Raley represents the Filipino immigrant experience in the early 1990s through the dark portrayal of two brothers as they struggle to assimilate into the alienating culture of Southern California.

people. Interpreting the work as an allegory for the turbulent socio-political situation in East Africa during the 1970s, Tanure Ojaide observes that "[p'Bitek's] viewpoint in *Prisoner* is pessimistic about Africa's political future, for there is no positive alternative to the bad leader. The successor could be equally bad or worse."

### Responses to Literature

1. Contrast the *Song of Lawino* with the *Song of Ocol*. In a 5–7-page essay, identify and describe how the poems dramatize a clash between cultures. Use examples from each text to support your opinions.
2. Some academics assert that African literature written in English is not really African. With another classmate, research the ways in which English as spoken and written by people in African countries differs from what you know as "standard," or even American English. What is the origin of Africa's English and why would African nations adopt the English

- language? Collect your findings in an organized oral report for the rest of your class.
3. Evaluate the following statement and be prepared to defend your position in a roundtable class discussion: Because of differences in language, politics, and culture, Western critics are not qualified to analyze or teach African literature.
  4. Write an essay in which you describe what features and characteristics of *Song of Lawino* you think reflect an oral tradition. Incorporate in your essay the ways in which you think p'Bitek's training as an anthropologist might have affected how he creatively presents issues within the context of the poem.

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## ■ Samuel Pepys

BORN: 1633, London, England

DIED: 1703, Clapham, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Memoirs Relating to the State of the Royal Navy in England* (1690)

*The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1825)



Samuel Pepys *Pepys, Samuels*, photograph. The Library of Congress.

### Overview

British author Samuel Pepys (pronounced "Peeps") fused together two opposite personality traits—he had a chaotic, unbridled personal life bursting with creative energy and physical passions, but he also had the ordered and disciplined mind of a highly successful bureaucrat. For over thirty years, he undertook the massive project of restructuring the entire British navy. But starting around this same time, he also wrote an astonishing diary, published in 1825 as *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, that, better than any other primary source, gives us a detailed portrait of the dynamic Restoration period in British history. Pepys essentially invented the form of the personal diary as it is known today.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**English Civil War Marred Childhood** Pepys was born in London in 1633, the son of a tailor and a butcher's sister. During his childhood, the English Civil War broke out. Lasting from 1642 to 1651, the war was a conflict between royalist forces who supported King Charles I (a Catholic-leaning believer in the divine right of kings) and Puritan rebels led by Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell's forces wanted a shift of power away from the king, the landed aristocracy, and the Church of England and more toward Parliament,

the urban merchant classes, and Puritan theology. The rebels won, and Charles I was executed in 1649. Great Britain became a commonwealth, and Cromwell was its leader.

Pepys was educated in Puritan schools, and in 1650, he entered Cambridge University. He graduated in 1653 with few prospects and little money, and in 1655 he married the fifteen-year-old Elizabeth St. Michel, a French Protestant who was even poorer than he. The couple was supported by Pepys's cousin Sir Edward Montagu, later the first Earl of Sandwich. Pepys became a secretary for Montagu, who was a powerful naval officer.

**Began Writing Diary** The year 1660 marked an important transition for Pepys and for all of England. Cromwell died in 1658, succeeded by his son Richard Cromwell, but by then the public was dissatisfied with Puritanical rule. Parliament voted to restore Charles II, the eldest son of Charles I, to the throne. The following period (1660–1700) was known as the Restoration. The first entry in the most revealing and intimate account of the Restoration period, Pepys's diary, is appropriately dated January 1, 1660.

Pepys accompanied Montagu on the voyage to Holland that returned Charles II to England. That same year, Pepys was appointed clerk at the Navy Office. The British navy at the time was totally chaotic by today's standards: Ships might or might not be owned by the state; there was no clear distinction between civilian and military sailors; no regular systems were in place for supplying the ships or paying the men; officers were likely to be courtiers appointed without experience; bookkeeping varied from person to person, and taking bribes was considered one of the privileges of office. Pepys pioneered thousands of small changes that would eventually transform this chaos into an orderly and professional navy.

**Increased Naval Responsibilities** When the Dutch War (a conflict between England and what would become the Netherlands over Dutch domination of world trade) broke out in 1665, Pepys was appointed surveyor general of the Victualing Office in addition to his regular duties for the navy. He remained at his post throughout the Great Plague of 1665 when most other inhabitants of London had left to avoid an outbreak of the deadly bubonic plague, a bacterial infection transmitted by fleas carried by rats. Pepys saved the Navy Office from the Great Fire of 1666 (when as much as 80 percent of London was destroyed by the blaze) by having the buildings around it destroyed in advance. Once the Dutch War ended in 1667 with a Dutch victory, Pepys established his reputation as a skilled public servant by eloquently and honestly defending the navy's management of the disastrous war before angry committees in the House of Commons.

**Served in Parliament** Pepys's appearance before Parliament evidently whetted his own aspirations for a seat. He was elected to Parliament in 1673 and again in 1679. In 1673, King Charles II transferred Pepys from the Navy Office to the secretaryship of the Admiralty. At the time of the Popish Plot in 1678, a time of anti-Catholic paranoia in the wake of a failed attempt to assassinate Charles II, the Whig opponents of one of Pepys's political allies accused Pepys of giving naval secrets to the (Catholic) French. Pepys resigned his office and was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1679, but the charges against him were unfounded, and Pepys was freed in 1680.

Meanwhile, Pepys's marriage was under strain starting in 1668 after his wife discovered him groping the household maid. The history of the affair, and the emotional turbulence for all concerned, is described in memorable detail in the diary. Pepys's wife died of a fever in 1669. His main companions afterwards were many of the most brilliant men of the Restoration, including John Evelyn, Christopher Wren, and John Dryden.

**Personal Restoration** In 1684 Pepys was elected president of the Royal Society, a prestigious organization of scientists, intellectuals, and (in Pepys's case) collectors and cataloguers of exotica. Pepys was restored to the secretaryship of the Admiralty, retaining the post until his voluntary retirement, with his eyesight failing, when dramatic political changes came through England in 1688. At that time, King James II, who had succeeded his elder brother Charles II in 1685, was overthrown because he attempted to restore Roman Catholicism to Britain. James II was replaced on the throne by his daughter, Mary II, and her Dutch husband, William III. This transfer of power was known as the Glorious Revolution.

Retiring in 1689 after the Glorious Revolution was completed, Pepys moved to the London suburb of Clapham. There, he devoted time to reading and writing. He spent much time writing what became the only work he saw published *Memories Relating to the State of the Royal Navy of England* (1690). Pepys died on May 26, 1703.

## Works in Literary Context

**Advent of Modern Diary** With *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Pepys essentially invented the modern diary, if by that word we mean an informal account of the thoughts, passions, events, and gossip of the day. Before the diary, however, there was the Puritan spiritual autobiography, to which he would have had some exposure in the Puritan schools he attended as a child. Most Puritans endorsed John Calvin's theology of "predestination," or the idea that if God truly knows everything and biblical prophecies are true, then God must know the future, which includes knowing who will go to heaven or hell even before they are born. Calvin believed that each

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pepys's famous contemporaries include:

**Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus** (or Tschirnhau-  
sen) (1651–1708): German mathematician, physicist,  
physician, and philosopher. He is most familiar today,  
however, for the chemical experiments that led to the  
invention of European porcelain. His books include  
*Medicina mentis sive artis inveniendi praecepta generali*  
(1687).

**Arthur Annesley, first Earl of Anglesey** (1614–1686):  
Irish politician. Annesley represented Dublin in the British  
parliament under Richard Cromwell. During a time  
when the English led brutal attacks against the Irish  
to stamp out political dissent and crush Catholicism,  
Annesley argued for moderation and nonviolence. He  
was a leader in bringing about the restoration of  
Charles II.

**Jeremy Collier** (1650–1726): English bishop. Collier is  
best known for his pious attack on the sexually charged  
Restoration comedies of William Congreve and John  
Vanbrugh in his *Short View of the Immorality and Pro-  
faneness of the English Stage* (1698).

**Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné, Comtesse de Grignan** (1646–1705): French aristocrat. When she got  
pregnant, married, and moved from Paris to Provence,  
she began one of the most remarkable series of correspondence in literary history. For the next thirty years,  
she exchanged over a thousand letters with her mother,  
sometimes writing up to twenty pages a day.

**William Bradford** (1663–1752): English printer and settler of the Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. His arrest  
in 1692 for offending the colonial Quaker leaders of Philadelphia helped shape the early debate over freedom of the press in early America. The jury was split in  
his trial, delivering no verdict.

**Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici** (1667–1743): Italian aristocrat. De Medici was the last of the powerful family  
who held sway over Florence for over four hundred years. Because of their banking interests, the Medicis were at one point the most wealthy family in Europe.  
She willed all of the vast Medici property to the city of Florence.

human being is born predestined for his or her fate and has a duty to discover the path that God has already laid out for them. Puritans were therefore encouraged to keep spiritual journals, noting the small coincidences and subtle clues in their lives that together sketch a map of one's life.

**Individualism** Pepys articulated the new modern *individual*, moving through his days according to his

own shifting passions, curiosities, likes and dislikes, speculations, and high ambitions. In this sense, Pepys reflected the same cultural influences that would later become the mode of the modern novel—a genre that explores individuality, subjectivity, the small details of daily life, the highs and lows of love and marriage, the foibles and confessions of imperfect people trying to make the most of their lives, and the relationship of the individual to larger society.

**Public versus Private** One recurring theme of the diary concerns tensions between the public, the private, and the idea of “secret.” Pepys sometimes goes to extremes in one direction, but most often he ends up with a kind of compromise. As he writes chronologically of his day, he will often move fluidly between his public duties as a navy bureaucrat, his private life as a husband or friend, and his secret life as a confessional writer or adulterous lover. In one famous passage about the coronation day of Charles II on April 23, 1661, he carefully details the grand public ceremonies of the event, his personal concerns with the location of his wife in the crowd, and his private bodily requirements of urinating and vomiting.

The frequent shifts between the public and the personal are captured in the sometimes bizarre writing style of the diary. Pepys kept his diary secret, stuffing it in cabinets and drawers. Most of it is written in shorthand, but when he wanted to be particularly secretive about something like a sexual affair, he would slip into an improvised mish-mash of numerous foreign languages. When the massive manuscript of the diary was discovered among Pepys's papers in the early 1800s, it was entirely and painstakingly decoded. The hapless transcriber failed to notice until after he was finished that one of the other books in the Pepys collection was his customized shorthand manual.

**Reflection on Restoration Culture** The Restoration was a period obsessed with novelty, passions, and enthusiasm, all processed through a balancing sense of reason, self-control, and social decorum. Pepys's diary is full of examples. Pepys was curious about whatever was new and exciting, whether it was shipbuilding, the new sciences, music, languages, prints, ballads, mathematics, or the theater. He was enthusiastic about beauty, especially the beauty of music and women; yet he labored constantly to resist the temptations of drink, the theater, and the numerous young women whom he pawed in closet, kitchen, or coach. He was a compulsive collector, acquiring countless ship models, scientific instruments, portraits, books, and coins—and his logical side led him to catalog all of it very precisely. Pepys's entire diary can be thought of as the most sophisticated expression of his instinct to collect and possess.

**Influence** Puritan spiritual autobiographies were influences on some early novels, particularly Daniel Defoe's

*Robinson Crusoe* (1719). But most novels are far from Puritan theology and deal more often with the free choices that characters make as they shape their own destiny. Pepys's diary helps bridge the gap although his diary was not a direct influence on the early novel, as it was not widely known until the twentieth century. Pepys wrote his diary for self-exploration and as a creative outlet rather than out of religious duty.

### Works in Critical Context

Pepys's diary was not transcribed and published until 1825. Even then it appeared in excerpts, and the first virtually complete edition was issued between 1893 and 1899. It was not until the 1970s that a fully decoded, uncensored version was available. The critical history of Pepys's diary, therefore, is oddly dislocated from his own period. Pepys was a well-known public servant and socialite in his own time, but even his literary friends such as John Dryden knew nothing about his diary and the remarkable literary talent that it would reveal.

**The Diary of Samuel Pepys** The diary was a revelation when it first appeared. One reviewer, Francis Jeffrey, wrote in 1825, “[We] can scarcely say that we wish it a page shorter; and are of opinion, that there is very little of it which does not help us to understand the character of his times and his contemporaries, better than we should ever have done without it; and makes us feel more assured that we comprehend the great historical events of the age, and the people who bore a part in them.” No doubt many Victorian critics would not have approved of the scandalous sexuality in the diary, but these passages were generally not published until the more permissive late twentieth century.

Since Pepys was a theater lover, literary critics have regularly turned to the diary as a rare source of firsthand accounts of the great age of Restoration drama. Recent critics have been interested in the ways in which Pepys defines the modern man, analyzing the complexity of his self-portrait. Cultural criticism and New Historicism often draws upon Pepys, noting the many ways in which his collections demonstrate aspects of an emerging material culture in the late seventeenth century, and how his alternating patterns of concealment and revelation are indicative of the new mode of self-invention that characterized the period.

### Responses to Literature

1. Pepys was very careful to hide his diary and write it in ways that are difficult to understand. Who, therefore, is the intended audience for the diary? Does your answer to this matter relate to how we read the diary today, and what value we assign to it? Create a presentation of your conclusions.
2. Look for phrases in the diary where Pepys expresses the extremes of pleasure. How many times do you

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Since Pepys's time, the diary form has proven to be a popular mode of storytelling. Writers such as Anaïs Nin, for example, have published their diaries, while other writers have adapted the form to fiction. The accumulation of small details in a diary establishes a sense of realism, while the intimate, confessional tone allows readers an emotional connection to the narrator. Well-known works written in the diary form include:

*A Diary from Dixie* (1905), a diary by Mary Boykin Chesnutt. Chesnutt's wonderfully written diary details her experiences on a South Carolina plantation throughout the Civil War. The diary was republished in a new edition, edited by prominent scholar C. Vann Woodward, in 1981 and won Pulitzer Prize in 1982.

*Lonelygirl15* (2006), an Internet series. More than two hundred thousand viewers regularly followed the video diary entries that the anonymous “*Lonelygirl15*” posted on the video sharing site YouTube. The compelling storyline of a girl involved in a religious cult and her struggles with her restrictive parents intrigued readers, even after the series was exposed as a fake.

*The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), a diary by Anne Frank. Begun on her thirteenth birthday, this diary covers two years of Frank's life while she and her family hid from the Nazis during Hitler's occupation of the Netherlands. The family was discovered, and Frank died in a Jewish concentration camp in 1945. The diary has become one of the most important and useful documents for understanding the history of World War II.

*The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1915–1941), five volumes of diaries by Virginia Woolf. Woolf had one of the most wide-ranging intellects of her era, and she was friends with most of the great thinkers of her time, from Sigmund Freud to James Joyce. Her diary reveals the wide sweep of her emotional life, and it is a near-epic document about the creative process of writing.

find him saying something is the “best,” the “greatest,” etc.? Note some of the places where Pepys expresses “enthusiasm,” and then do some research on what exactly this word meant in Pepys's time and why it was controversial. Write an essay about your findings.

3. What can Pepys's diary tell us as a firsthand account of the most significant historical events of the era: the restoration of Charles II, the plague of 1666, the Great Fire of London, and the emergence of Restoration comedy? What does the diary offer that straightforward historical accounts leave out? Write a paper about your conclusions.

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## Arturo Pérez-Reverte

BORN: 1951, Cartagena, Spain

NATIONALITY: Spanish

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Flanders Panel* (1990)

*The Club Dumas* (1993)

*The Seville Communion* (1995)

### Overview

The Spanish novelist Arturo Pérez-Reverte may have been aided in his writing career by his popularity as a war correspondent and television personality, but it is his



Arturo Pérez-Reverte Lalo Yasky / Wire Image / Getty Images

intelligence and literary acumen that have allowed him to remain a best-selling author in his native country and around the world. His novels have been translated into some nineteen languages and have sold more than 3 million copies. Five of his literary thrillers have been translated into English.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Avid Reader of Novels of the Golden Age of Spain**  
Pérez-Reverte was born November 24, 1951, in Cartagena, Spain. His childhood on the Mediterranean coast in the province of Murcia has had a profound and continual impact on his life and writings, a fact demonstrated through his strong interest in scuba diving and long-term sojourns on his private sailboat, where he spends time composing his novels. Another childhood interest that he still maintains is reading; during his youth he read a book every two to three days. From age nine to eighteen, he read thousands of books, with an abiding interest in the Spanish Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as the Spanish novel of the nineteenth

century, a time period and genre present in many of his own narratives.

**War Correspondent** After obtaining his undergraduate degree in political science and journalism, Pérez-Reverte worked on oil tankers in the early 1970s in order to see the world. His time at sea also allowed him to follow to a certain degree in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, both of whom had been employed in the merchant marines. After only a few years, however, he switched professions, working from 1973 to 1985 as a reporter for the Spanish newspaper *Pueblo*, specializing in reports on terrorism, illegal trafficking, and armed conflict. During his years as a journalist—from 1985 to 1994—he worked for *Televisión Española*—covering wars in Cyprus, Lebanon, the Western Sahara, Equatorial Guinea, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Falkland Islands, Chad, Libya, the Sudan, Angola, Mozambique, Croatia, and Sarajevo, as well as the coup in Tunisia, the Romanian Revolution, and the Gulf War. Twice he disappeared and was presumed dead: once in Western Sahara in 1975, and once in Eritrea in 1977. In an interview with Alix Wilber, Pérez-Reverte commented that war “was a fascinating, passionately interesting adventure for a 20-year-old youth. I discovered horror later, when I started to see that war was not an adventure.”

Almost all of Pérez-Reverte’s novels have war as a backdrop to a critical examination of both Spanish society and human nature in general. His first published novel, dealing with the Spanish War of Independence, appeared in 1986 under the title *The Hussar*. *The Fencing Master* (1988), translated from the Spanish in 1998, is, however, the first novel he wrote. Set in the fall of 1868 shortly before the ouster of Queen Isabel II, the plot centers on the fencing expert don Jaime Astarloa, who, having fallen in love with doña Adela de Otero, a mysterious Italian woman desirous of learning don Jaime’s unstoppable fencing thrust, is soon swept up in the world of politics, secrecy, and betrayal. In this novel the author is portraying the society and day of 1868 Spain but embellishing that history with the events that he witnessed as a war correspondent in places such as Beirut, Sarajevo, Eritrea, and El Salvador.

**Leaving Journalism** In 1991, Pérez-Reverte covered the Gulf War and the war in Croatia. From 1992 to 1994 he was a war correspondent to Sarajevo, experiencing many of the events that he later placed in *Comanche Territory: A Report* (1994), published shortly after he left his full-time job at *Televisión Española*. His departure from journalism was not unexpected. As early as March 1993, Pérez-Reverte was taking a cynical view of his life as a reporter and program host, once stating at the onset of the *Code One Program* that he hosted: “Today you are going to see a really bloody program with all the horror that you can imagine and even more. It is so disgusting that I refuse to watch it. Goodbye,” at which point he walked off the set.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pérez-Reverte’s famous contemporaries include:

**Dan Rather** (1931–): American journalist who covered the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

**Ronald Reagan** (1911–2004): The fortieth president of the United States of America, who held office from 1981 until 1989.

**Umberto Eco** (1932–): Italian novelist who has effectively woven semiotics, or the study of meaning, into the plots of his novels.

**Kingsley Amis** (1922–1995): British writer known for his satiric novels.

**Sandra Cisneros** (1954–): Mexican American author who has received acclaim for her representation of young Latinas in America, particularly in *The House on Mango Street*.

By this time the author-journalist had already become something of a celebrity. On January 19, 1993, he had received the Asturias-92 de Periodismo prize for his coverage of the civil war in Yugoslavia, and on November 3, 1993, he received the Premio Ondas for his *Law of the Street*, a five-year Radio Nacional de España program on marginalized members of society. Additionally, in March the movie version of *The Fencing Master* won the Goya Prize for best adapted screenplay and best original music. Also in 1993, he was selected by the French magazine *Lire* as one of the ten best foreign novelists.

**Further Success with Fiction** With the release of the multiple-award-winning *The Club Dumas* in 1993, Pérez-Reverte began something of a roll. He followed up his success with *The Seville Communion* in 1995 and *The Nautical Chart* in 2000. Pérez-Reverte has continued to published frequently in recent years, even returning to his abiding interest in the sea in *Cape Trafalgar* in 2004.

### Works in Literary Context

Arturo Pérez-Reverte, one of the leading detective fiction writers of contemporary Spain, has successfully built a career since 1986 with a style that harks back to the historical and pamphlet novels of the nineteenth century. He is also one of the most widely known and read Spanish writers outside of Spain. Often compared, particularly in France, to Alexandre Dumas *père*, Pérez-Reverte’s works have been translated into more than thirty languages, adapted for the cinema, anthologized, and honored with multiple awards in various countries. Pérez-Reverte himself, however, considers his fictions to be simply a rewriting of the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Pérez-Reverte was no stranger to the dangers of reporting from the frontlines of wars. Here are some works that analyze the lives of war correspondents:

*A Mighty Heart* (2007), a film directed by Michael Winterbottom. This film is Mariane Pearl's recounting of the life and death of her husband, Daniel Pearl, a journalist who was killed when he was investigating a possible connection between al Qaeda and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence.

*The Best and the Brightest* (1972), a nonfiction work by David Halberstam. In this work, Halberstam covers the Vietnam War and events leading to it.

*Active Service* (1899), a novel by Stephen Crane. Like Pérez-Reverte, Crane decided not merely to describe his own story as a war correspondent but to recreate his experiences in the Greco-Turkish War in novel form.

many books that he has read and loved in his life, manipulating them in a manner that details the historical implications and cultural influences on the modern world.

**Historical Novel? Detective Stories?** In a 1999 interview with Alix Wilber, Pérez-Reverte stated that he never really wanted to be a writer but that he began to write books after traveling abroad and feeling a desire to bring a sense of order to his world. This desire is also reflected in the characters within his works, characters that cling to their memories or culture in order to survive better in a world that they do not like. While some critics argue that Pérez-Reverte writes historical novels, this claim is true only in the sense that he uses history to expound upon the present-day conflicts he has witnessed as a journalist. As he stated in an interview with Ron Hogan: "The person who sees in my novels simple detective stories is making a mistake, as is the reader who sees them as historical novels." As José Belmonte Serrano writes, "In the magical pot he continues cooking ... History, art, and the Gothic novel."

**Intertextuality** Pérez-Reverte's love of and incorporation of history can best be seen in terms of his works' intertextuality—their reference to other pieces of literature. *The Club Dumas* is perhaps more intertextual than any other of the author's works. Pérez-Reverte noted to Wilber that "some students from the University of Salamanca did a paper on the implicit and explicit literature in *The Club Dumas*, and there were about 500 titles, some of which are cited expressly, others not quoted but indirectly referred to.... I must confess there were some that even I had not foreseen. But I will say that there were

others I knew were there, and that nobody caught." This novel is one instance of the author's incorporation of other texts into his own stories.

### Works in Critical Context

Arturo Pérez-Reverte's gift at interweaving history and sweeping metaphors to enhance and expand upon the plots of his novels has received near universal acclaim. Those who have disapproved of some aspects of Pérez-Reverte's generally see only minor flaws, however, and typically deem the entire work worthy.

***The Club Dumas*** Pérez-Reverte's most acclaimed novel is *The Club Dumas* (1993), translated into English in 1997. The novel revolves around a rare-book scout, Lucas Corso, who is asked to find the last two of the three existing copies of the Renaissance work *The Book of the Nine Doors to the Kingdom of Shadows*. Margot Livesey of the *New York Times Book Review* wrote, "Mr. Pérez-Reverte... is extremely good on the business of book collecting. Among the pleasures of *The Club Dumas* is the intimate sense it conveys of this highly specialized type of commerce.... [He] does an admirable job of describing these bibliophiles, as well as of creating works like *The Nine Doors*, whose illustrations are reproduced and described in fascinating detail." A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer reported, "Readers get, together with a mass of tables, diagrams, clues, decoys, and nudgings about intertextuality... all twenty-seven illustrations, so that they can play spot-the-differences, and draw their own conclusions." The reviewer called *The Club Dumas* a "wayward and moderately enjoyable" mystery novel. *Booklist* contributor Brian Kenney labeled the novel "witty, suspenseful, and intellectually provocative." Although Livesey said she found herself "growing impatient" with some of the plot twists and narrative techniques, she called the book an "intelligent and delightful novel." *The Club Dumas* was adapted as the 1999 film *The Ninth Gate*, starring the American actor Johnny Depp.

***The Flanders Panel*** *The Flanders Panel*, published in 1994, is a translation of Pérez-Reverte's 1990 Spanish novel *La Tabla de Flandes*. It belongs to the genre of postmodern mysteries made popular by Italian author Umberto Eco, but in the opinion of the *Times Literary Supplement*'s Michael Eaude, "Pérez-Reverte's plotting is much tighter and his narrative is more exciting." The novel's heroine, Julia, is an art restorer who discovers a murder mystery hidden in a medieval painting of a chess game. The game's moves are continued in the form of messages and events in Julia's life amid the Madrid art world; gradually, she realizes that she has become a target in a centuries-old mystery.

Discussing the book with reservations about its "undistinguished" prose style and stereotyped characters, Eaude maintained that "*The Flanders Panel* is never boring." The critic commended the way Pérez-Reverte

worked background material, including chess moves, into the plot, and noted “a number of shocking twists.” “Above all,” Eaude concluded, “Pérez-Reverte makes use of a vivid imagination.” Plaudits also came from a reviewer from the *London Observer*, who called the novel a “delightfully absorbing confection” and “ingenious hocus pocus from start to finish.” A *Publishers Weekly* contributor characterized the novel as “uneven but intriguing.” That reviewer, like Eaude, faulted the characters as underdeveloped and also felt that the mystery was solved unconvincingly and conventionally. The reviewer responded most favorably to the author’s use of chess metaphors for human actions and to Julia’s analyses of the painting, termed “clever and quite suspenseful.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Read *The Club Dumas* and then view the adaptation of it, *The Ninth Gate*. What are some of the key differences between these two representations? In a short essay, combine your analysis of the differences between the two with a few observations on how you responded to each. (Consider which representation was more appealing and why, and why would this be or not be appealing to a contemporary audience.)
2. Pérez-Reverte does not establish a specific time for the events told in *The Club Dumas*. In which time period do you see the events occurring? Can you pick out a few clues that indicate this time period is the intended one? Could the novel actually have a sense of timelessness? What do you think?
3. As a war correspondent, Pérez-Reverte has seen and written about many scenes that have left lifelong impressions. What kind of skills do you think a correspondent of this sort would need to be successful at the task at hand? In Pérez-Reverte’s writings, is there a particular passage that stands out as more realistic than others because of this? If you were a correspondent today, is there a political hot spot that you would like to cover as a reporter? Which one and why?

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## Francesco Petrarch

BORN: 1304, Arezzo, Italy

DIED: 1374, Arqua Petrarca, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*On His Own Ignorance and That of Many* (1367)

*Africa* (1396)



Francesco Petrarch Hulton Archive / Getty Images

*Canzoniere: The Sonnets and Stanzas of Petrarch*

(1470)

*Triumphs* (1470)

## Overview

Regarded as the father of Italian humanism, Francesco Petrarch brought the classical world of Greece and Rome to life with his enthusiastic scholarship of the words and wisdom of ancient writers. Poet, philosopher, and moralist, Petrarch captured the vitality and variety of life in his work. He is recognized for the lyric poetry in his *Canzoniere: The Sonnets and Stanzas of Petrarch* (1470), a collection of poems expressing his unrequited love for a woman named Laura. Primarily, however, Petrarch is remembered as the writer who popularized the Italian sonnet form—also referred to as the Petrarchan sonnet—that influenced poets throughout Europe for more than three hundred years.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Intellect Flowered during Early Renaissance**  
Born Francesco Petrarca (but commonly called Petrarch in English) in 1304 in Arezzo, in what is now Italy, he was the oldest son of a notary who had been banished from Florence in 1301 because of his political activities. (At the time, the Italian peninsula was divided into city-states, like Florence, as well as larger territories like the Kingdom of Naples. The city-states in particular were emerging as centers of commerce, the arts, and sciences. Because many city-states were a conduit of goods and learning from the Byzantine and Islamic empires, they provided great impetus to the developing Renaissance, which was a flowering of the arts, literature, music, and science. (The Renaissance lasted from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries in Italy.)

In 1312, the family moved to Avignon, France, where Petrarch's father established himself as a successful lawyer. After being privately educated by tutors, Petrarch began studying civil law at the University of Montpellier in 1316. Extraordinarily bright and intellectually curious, he spent so much of his allowance on the works of classical poets that his angry father once burned the young Petrarch's library except for works by Cicero and Virgil.

**Wrote First Poems** Around this same time, Petrarch's mother died, inspiring him to write his earliest known poem in tribute to her. In 1320, Petrarch and his younger brother entered law school in Bologna, where they remained until the death of their father in 1326. Abandoning his legal studies and quickly spending his inheritance, Petrarch settled in Avignon and entered minor orders at the papal court there, planning to pursue a religious career. (In 1309, Avignon had been chosen by Pope Clement V as his residence. Thus the seat of the papacy was Avignon instead of Rome, a situation that

lasted until 1378. Clement and his successors who made the city the center of the church were French.)

**Love for Laura** According to literary legend, while attending services on Good Friday in 1327, Petrarch saw and fell in love with a woman he thereafter called Laura. For the rest of his life, he wrote verse about his unrequited love for her, poems he initially collected into a volume around 1336 and from then on reworked.

Petrarch became a private chaplain to Giovanni Cardinal Colonna in 1330, a position he would hold for almost twenty years. During those years, Petrarch proved a prolific writer, producing not only poetry in both Latin and Italian, but also essays on topics as diverse as destiny, famous people, religious life, and the nature of ignorance. As he traveled on diplomatic business, Petrarch composed or revised most of his major works and maintained faithful correspondence with friends, scholars, and the nobility of Europe, as evidenced by the hundreds of letters he wrote.

**Poet Laureate** Included among Petrarch's major poetic works are *Africa* (1396) and *Triumphs* (1470). *Africa* is an epic poem celebrating the victory of the Roman general Scipio Africanus over the Carthaginian general Hannibal in the Second Punic War. The poem is written in Latin hexameter, while *Triumphs* is written in Italian terza rima—lines of eleven syllables, arranged in groups of three and rhyming “ababcbcd” —the measure Dante uses in his *Divine Comedy*. Petrarch's most popular work during the Renaissance, *Triumphs*, a long allegorical poem, depicts six stages of the soul's spiritual journey: Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity. The popularity of this work was the result of its encyclopedic catalog of famous people, its visionary outlook, and its emphasis on salvation through God.

Because his works were widely distributed, Petrarch was admired for his talents as a lyric poet and famous for his passion for the unknown Laura. He received simultaneous invitations to be named poet laureate in Rome and Paris in 1340 and ultimately accepted the position in Rome. On Easter Sunday a year later, in an elaborate coronation ceremony held in the Palace of the Senate on the Capitoline Hill, Petrarch was named the poet laureate of Rome. In the classical tradition, Petrarch was crowned with laurel leaves. It is believed that no ceremony of such magnitude had taken place for over a thousand years.

**Focused on Seniles at End of Life** After years of traveling and writing, Petrarch went to Padua, in June 1361 to avoid the Milan outbreak of the Black Plague—a deadly pandemic of the bacterium commonly known as the bubonic plague—that had taken the lives of Petrarch's sons, the woman believed to have been his beloved Laura, and several of his friends, including Cardinal Colonna. In Padua he began a new collection, *Seniles*.

In the fall of 1362, Petrarch moved to Venice, where he received a house in exchange for the bequest of his library to the city, residing there until Francesco da

Carrara, his patron in Padua, gave him some land in Arqua, near Padua. In 1370, Petrarch retired to a house he had built there and studied, worked on *Triumphs* and *Canzoniere*, and received friends and family. At the time of his death in July 1374, Petrarch was working on a biographical letter intended to end the *Seniles*.

### Works in Literary Context

Petrarch's work is filled with extended metaphors and references to classical antiquity, features that exemplify Renaissance poetry. He is widely believed to have been influenced by the study of Greek and Latin and was recognized for reviving interest in the classical languages. In particular, he emulated famous Romans Virgil, Cicero, and Seneca in his work and wrote biographies of famous Romans, *On Illustrious Men* (begun c. 1337). Petrarch was also influenced by the Italian sonnet, a form with an octet rhyming in the pattern "abbaabba" and a sestet following the pattern "cdecde." He is credited with popularizing the Italian sonnet, and it is generally regarded as his most important contribution to English writers.

**Importance of Italian and Latin** Having lived both in Provence and in Italy and having been a student of the classical lyric, Petrarch was the inheritor of an ancient and thriving tradition. Despite his notion that Latin was a more noble instrument of expression, he must have sensed that the Italian language provided him the means of externalizing the subtlest nuances of his inmost feelings and thoughts. Although many of his Latin compositions are more forward-looking, the *Triumphs*, which is medieval in design, and the *Canzoniere*, which belongs to an ancient tradition of love lyrics, have remained the most popular, perhaps because they were written in the vernacular and because they reflect Petrarch's own highly refined sensibilities and his wondrous skill with a language that was not wholly his own.

**Laura and the Canzoniere** In its final form, the *Canzoniere* contains 366 poems: 317 sonnets, twenty-nine cazone (songs), nine sestinas, seven ballads, and four madrigals. The collection is divided into two sections. Composed of 266 poems, the first section primarily focuses on Laura during her lifetime, with some political, moral, and miscellaneous verse interspersed. The poems in the second section are memories of Laura after her death. For the most part, the narrator of the *Canzoniere* contemplates his passion for Laura, the suffering caused by unrequited love, and his efforts to free himself from his desire for an unobtainable woman. The last poem of the volume closes with a plea to the Virgin Mary to end the narrator's heartache. While the existence and identity of Laura remain unknown, it is obvious that Petrarch loved her through the poetry he created, and critics have determined that she has served as the embodiment of feminine virtue and beauty for generations of poets.

**Influence** Petrarch's influence on the literary world was immediate and vast. Most all of the great European

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Petrarch's famous contemporaries include:

**Giovanni Boccaccio** (1313–1375): Italian author. A contemporary of Petrarch, Boccaccio is the author of *The Decameron* (c. 1353), a collection of tales told by seven ladies and three men who are fleeing Florence to escape the plague.

**John of Gaunt** (1340–1399): English royalty. The father of King Henry IV, Gaunt was a prominent political figure during the reign of King Richard II, as well as Geoffrey Chaucer's patron.

**Inca Roca** (birth and death dates unknown): Inca ruler. Roca ruled from around 1350 to 1380, and organized schools for boys of the imperial class.

**Kazimierz III Wielki, Kazimierz the Great** (1309–1370): Polish king. The last king of Poland of the Piast dynasty, Kazimierz the Great helped create a strong, stable nation by establishing peace with the Czechs in 1334.

**Andrew of Wyntoun** (c.1350–c.1425): Scottish poet. Wyntoun wrote *The Orgynale Cronykil* (c. 1420), a history of the world from creation to the accession of James I.

**Nicholas Trivet** (c.1258–c.1334): English prior and author. Trivet is best remembered for writing three histories in the 1320s: an Anglo-Norman chronicle that covers the creation to 1285, which contained the story of Constance later told by Chaucer; *Annals of Six Kings of England 1136–1307* (c. 1320), which provided guidance for Edward I during his reign; and *Historia ab orbe Condita* (c. 1327), an encyclopedic history influenced by Vincent of Beauvais.

writers continued Petrarch's legacy, whether through imitation or translation. Italian poets Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso, Spanish author Luis de Góngora y Argote, French poet Pierre de Ronsard, Portuguese writer Luis de Camoëns—Petrarch provided an innovative, captivating form for all of these writers. Indeed, even much of the English poetry by such writers as Chaucer, Donne, Wyatt, Surrey, and Shakespeare owes its craft to Petrarch, who introduced the technique of cataloguing physical perfections, along with the resulting feelings such adoration inspires.

### Works in Critical Context

Critics consider Petrarch not only one of the greatest love poets in all of world literature, but also the founder of humanism, the intellectual, literary, and scientific movement that based every branch of learning on the culture and literature of classical antiquity. His works in the Italian sonnet form are generally regarded as his most significant contribution to literature. Numerous critics have credited Petrarch with reviving traditional poetic forms.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Who Laura was—even if she really existed—is a mystery. Without a doubt, the love Petrarch held for Laura was unrequited and based on an idealized image of womanhood. Other works of literature that are centered around the idea of unrequited love include:

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), a novel by Victor Hugo. Archdeacon Frollo falls hopelessly under the spell of the beautiful gypsy girl Esmeralda in this novel set in fifteenth-century Paris.

*Great Expectations* (1860–1861), a novel by Charles Dickens. Although Estella's ability to love any man has been destroyed by the bitter Miss Havisham, Pip, the main character, seeks a romantic relationship with Estella throughout the novel.

*The Great Gatsby* (1925), novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Jay Gatsby, the novel's protagonist, spends his life trying to attract the attention of the pampered, pretty socialite Daisy Buchanan.

**Poetry** Critics laud the importance of Petrarch's Italian sonnets. Observes Christopher Kleinhenz, "In their attempts to define the excellence of the Petrarchan sonnet, critics praise it for its precision and compactness, for its graceful symmetry and vibrant musicality, and for its noble sentiments and intimate tones." Additionally, scholars note the relationship between form and meaning in Petrarch's poetry, his imagery, and his use of intricate syntax. Furthermore, critics frequently discuss the tension between body and spirit present in Petrarch's works, his efforts to reconcile Christian and pagan ideals, his extensive use of classical mythology, and his celebration of figures from the classical period.

### Responses to Literature

1. Some scholars have presented evidence to show that Laura was an actual person, although Petrarch never mentioned her in any of his correspondence. Investigating the facts available, determine whether you agree to the existence of a real Laura in Petrarch's life. If she were real, do you think Petrarch ever spoke to her? Did she ever know about his feelings for her? Create a presentation that displays your findings.
2. Pretend you are Laura, the object of Petrarch's desires, to whom he wrote many love poems. Write Petrarch a letter refusing his love, responding to specific lines in his verse. Explain the circumstances in both of your lives that prevent you from being together.
3. How is Petrarch important in the ways Romeo, the male protagonist of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*,

experiences and talks about love? To what extent do you believe Shakespeare would have been familiar with the work of Petrarch? Write an essay that presents your conclusions.

4. Why has Petrarch been called the inventor of modern research? How did he revive culture? Write a paper that outlines your beliefs on these subjects.
5. Read Petrarch's "Letter to Cicero." Determine why Petrarch compares himself with Cicero. Why was Petrarch disappointed in Cicero? What does he accuse Cicero of? Do you think Petrarch was really writing to the dead Cicero, or was he writing a letter to himself? Write a paper that addresses these questions.

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## Arturo Uslar Pietri

BORN: 1906, Caracas, Venezuela

DIED: 2001, Caracas, Venezuela

NATIONALITY: Venezuelan

GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Barrabas, and Other Stories* (1928)

*The Red Lances* (1931)

*Net* (1936)

*Robinson's Island* (1981)



Arturo Uslar Pietri *Pietri, Dr. Arturo Uslar, photograph. AP Images.*

## Overview

Both a writer and a statesman, Arturo Uslar Pietri achieved recognition in Latin American literature primarily for his poetic fiction and his essays. The vividness of his writing, with its arresting similes and metaphors, won praise from a variety of critics, and he was called a master of the short story. One of the first writers to apply the term *magic realism* to Latin American fiction that juxtaposes reality and wondrous events, Uslar Pietri used the technique in his own writing, which often focuses on his native Venezuela.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Youth and Wonderment in the Venezuelan Countryside** Uslar Pietri, born in Caracas, was the son of a general and attended private schools to prepare him for acceptance to the Universidad Central de Venezuela in 1923. When Uslar Pietri was eight years old, he and his family moved to Cagua, a rural town southwest of Caracas, where his father had been designated civil administrator. For the young Uslar Pietri, this association with the Venezuelan countryside was an unforgettable experience. During this first contact with Cagua and later during his stay in Maracay (1916–1923), Uslar Pietri was

charmed by the wild nature that surrounded him and the almost magical atmosphere in which people lived. He collected and retained in his memory the superstitions, legends, fables, and tales of mysterious or extraordinary happenings circulating among peasants and farm workers. Uslar Pietri's preference for rural settings in most of his short stories and his familiarity with the environment and psychology of country people cannot be understood without taking into consideration his Cagua and Maracay experiences.

**Law School and a Break with Regionalism** From 1924 to 1929, Uslar Pietri studied law at the Universidad Central in Caracas. These were important formative years in his life. He took part, with other members of his generation, in several *tertulias*, or social-literary gatherings. He was not only attracted by Spanish American *modernistas* but also by a variety of foreign writers: Henri Barbusse, Gabriel Miró, Azorín, Antonio Machado, Oscar Wilde, Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Korolenko, and especially Leonid Andreyev. His early inclination to modernism, evident in his first poems and short stories, gave way to an increasingly sympathetic appreciation for the avant-garde movements.

In the following years, he began publishing short stories and his first major work, *Barrabas, and Other Stories*. The impact of the book was extraordinary. *Criollismo* (local color) had dominated Venezuela's literary world until then and was especially prevalent in the short story: use of regional attire, local symbols, countryside dialect, and a "picturesque" approach to reality was common. *Barrabas, and Other Stories* was a striking departure from that tradition. Three of its stories have Oriental settings; two have urban backgrounds; and another two take place on the high seas.

**Paris, City of Light** After graduating from law school in 1929, Uslar Pietri accepted an appointment as civil attaché to the Venezuelan embassy in Paris. The next five years (1929–1934) were decisive in his intellectual and cultural development, as he told Margarita Eskenazi: "I left a backward, marginal and rural country without a publishing house, a symphonic orchestra or any signs of intellectual life. I felt privileged to arrive in the Paris of surrealism, a city with all kinds of literary opportunities. My life made a 180-degree turn." Uslar Pietri took full advantage of the favorable circumstances offered by the new milieu. He attended the League of Nations meetings in Geneva and listened to Aristide Briand, Gustav Stresemann, and Arthur Henderson as they tried to chart a course for peace in a Europe stuck with the results of the "bad peace" (the Treaty of Versailles, which many saw as unbearably punitive toward Germany) that had concluded World War I in 1919. He also got to know artists and writers such as Paul Valéry, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Rafael Alberti, Jean Cassou, and Massimo Bontempelli. Two of the Latin American exiles he met in Paris, Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Ángel Asturias, remained his close friends until the end of their lives.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pietri's famous contemporaries include:

**B. Traven** (1890?–1969?): An enigmatic author best known for his novel *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1927), a tale of the corrupting power of greed and violence. The author's true identity remains a subject of much debate today.

**Michel Foucault** (1926–1984): A controversial French philosopher and sociologist, Foucault's work ranges from criticism of social institutions, most notably the prison system, to the history of sexuality. His death was the first well-known AIDS-related fatality in France.

**Norman Mailer** (1923–2007): A novelist, poet, playwright, film director, and journalist, Mailer was a true American Renaissance man. One of the founders of the so-called New Journalism, also called creative nonfiction, Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize twice.

**Alejo Carpentier** (1904–1980): A Cuban writer acknowledged as one of the earliest Latin American authors to create works of magic realism.

**Miguel Ángel Asturias** (1899–1974): A Guatemalan poet and novelist famous for his incorporation of Mayan myths into modern fiction with his novel *Men of Maize*.

**Marcos Pérez Jiménez** (1914–2001): A Venezuelan soldier who participated in a coup in 1945 and the subsequent military junta that ruled the country from 1948 to 1952; that year he was declared president outright. He ruled as virtual dictator until 1958, when rioting mobs forced him to flee the country.

**A Turn toward History** While in Europe, writing as the world found itself increasingly in the grip of a deep economic depression, Uslar Pietri published *The Red Lances*, his first historical novel, in which he offers a panorama of the Venezuelan War of Independence (1811–1823), with the sheer brutality of its destructive forces. Uslar Pietri presents this story on three distinct levels: the atmosphere of fantasy and superstition of the black slaves; a legendary vision of history seen mainly by Fernando Fonta, the main character; and the realistic presentation of the sordid life in the slave barracks and the orgy of violence among José Tomás Boves's *llaneros* ("plainsmen," or cowboys). This is not an idyllic version of the war for independence, and yet it has an epic aura. Mariano Picón Salas has pointed out its cinematic qualities and refers to the "pictorial impressionism and great splashes of color."

**Entry into—and Exit from—Politics** In 1939, after returning to Venezuela with the onset of World War II in Europe, Uslar Pietri served first as a minister

of education, then of finance, and finally the interior before a military coup in 1945 (coinciding closely with the end of World War II in both Europe and Asia) prompted him to take up temporary residence in Canada and the United States for the next five years. He returned home in 1950 and reentered politics in 1959. He ran unsuccessfully for president in 1963 and continued as senator until 1973, when he retired from politics to write and teach.

Uslar Pietri wrote many more essays and several more novels in the years between his departure from the political scene and his departure from the "mortal coil," maintaining a role for himself as a critical commentator on Venezuela's different political and social controversies. Perhaps his best-known work of this period is *Robinson's Island* (1981), though he continued to write—and then dictate—newspaper columns up until shortly before his death in 2001. In 1989, Venezuela was shaken by widespread riots responding to a general decline in well-being throughout the country—in part a result of the overdependence on oil against which Uslar Pietri had warned back at mid-century. Uslar Pietri played his role in opposing the military's violent suppression of these riots, though he was skeptical of the 1992 coup attempt and rise toward power of Hugo Chávez (who would later become president of the country), whom he saw as rather megalomaniacal. Upon his death in February 2001, in Caracas, Uslar Pietri was recognized for his many contributions—artistic, political, and intellectual—to both Venezuelan and world culture.

### Works in Literary Context

Uslar Pietri's early works secured for him a place in literary circles, especially among some of the most noted Latin American authors; Mario Vargas Llosa called *The Red Lances* the work that first brought world attention to the Latin American novel. This status allowed him to experiment with magic realism (a term he coined in 1948 to describe "the depiction of man as an element of mystery surrounded by realistic data," or "a poetic intuition or denial of reality.") and to continue writing political essays without worrying about pleasing either his critics or his constituency. While not as widely recognized as that of many of his literary contemporaries or successors, Uslar Pietri's part in revolutionizing literature in Venezuela earned the appreciation of his compatriots and the respect of critics.

**Magical Realism** Uslar Pietri was perhaps best known for his short fiction; the publication of *Barrabas, and Other Stories* in 1928 revolutionized the genre in Venezuela, departing from a local emphasis and experimenting with modernistic and surrealistic techniques. *Barrabas* also contains the author's first work in the Latin American genre of magic realism, which he would continue to develop in later compilations such as *Net*.

**National Interpretation** Uslar Pietri's "novels of national interpretation" eschew these more experimental styles in dealing with historical subjects, somewhat typical of Latin American novels of the 1920s and 1930s. He enlisted the aid of stock characters, narrative structure, and local dialect common to the genre but added his own realistic twist: most of the characters in the conflicts have no real idea of how or why they are part of the given situation of the plot. His first and most acclaimed novel, *The Red Lances*, dramatizes Venezuela's war for independence from Spain by following several characters. While the novel's broad scope and poetic language give it an epic cast, it is also brutally honest in its treatment of the violence of war. Uslar Pietri's later novels, including *Robinson's Island*, earned him laurels because of his innovative use of nonlinear time.

### Works in Critical Context

Arturo Uslar Pietri has been acclaimed as one of the best short-story writers in contemporary Latin American literature. Although his novelistic talent has not received the unanimous recognition given to his skill in the other narrative genre, many critics feel he deserves to be considered one of the most able practitioners of the historical novel in Latin America.

**Barrabas, and Other Stories** Although Uslar Pietri has received some criticism from traditionalist quarters, the reception given to *Barrabas* and its author was overwhelmingly favorable. Pedro Sotillo, a respected Venezuelan critic, stated prophetically when the book was published, "This young man is an intellectual new reality in our world of letters. I am afraid that he is going to spoil our literary tribe's dance of mummies." Rafael Angarita was more emphatic. The book, according to him, was a dividing scaffold in Venezuelan literature, "the farewell to plastic and superficial landscapes, to vernacularism and nativism."

**The Red Lances** Uslar Pietri has also won particular acclaim for *The Red Lances*. Set during Venezuela's struggle for independence from Spain in the early 1800s, the book depicts several minor characters "irrevocably involved in what [Uslar Pietri] deemed the moment of emergence of the national character," as Donald Yates describes it. "All the characters," notes Herbert L. Matthews in the *New York Times Book Review*, "are killed, as they would have been in real life." Uslar Pietri's realism in the novel includes descriptions of the brutalities committed by war leaders and what Matthews calls an "evil, brooding atmosphere" hanging over everything. Violent and bloody, the book nonetheless struck Matthews as "a poetic evocation" of the difficult birth of a country. Assessing *The Red Lances* in 1963, upon its publication in English, Matthews declared that "it remains today as fresh and vivid as it was in 1930."

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Uslar Pietri was one of the first Latin American writers to work in the genre of magical realism. Other books in the same vein include:

*The House of the Spirits* (1982), a novel by Isabel Allende.

In the first novel from the acclaimed Chilean author, the tradition of magical realism is carried forward with this tale of a family's experiences, including spirit intervention and paranormal phenomena, over four generations.

*Men of Maize* (1949), a novel by Miguel Ángel Asturias.

Written by one of Uslar Pietri's Parisian roommates, this novel indicts capitalism for the devastating effects of capitalists' greed upon Latin America's indigenous peoples, while simultaneously delving into native myths, magic, and lore.

*The Aleph* (1949), a collection of short stories by Jorge Luis Borges. One of the acknowledged masters of magical realism, Borges' stories in this work deal largely with concepts of infinity and the universe.

"The Nose" (1836), a short story by Nikolai Gogol.

Although this short story by the Russian author predates the term by over a century, it is clearly a work of magical realism, as it tells the tale of a bureaucrat's nose that detaches from its owner's face and goes on to live its own life.

### Responses to Literature

1. What motivated Uslar Pietri to write *The Funeral Mass*? Is the motivation clear in the text?
2. How does history inform and influence Uslar Pietri's work? How do you think Uslar Pietri views history?
3. Research Venezuelan folklore traditions. How are they expressed in Uslar Pietri's work? Describe a few of your own folkloric traditions.
4. Uslar Pietri set *The Red Lances* during a time he considered to be a defining point in Venezuela's national character. If you were to write a historical novel set in a similar character-defining moment in your own nation's history, what era would you choose? Why do you think Uslar Pietri made his work brutally realistic? Would you follow his example in your own novel? Why or why not?

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## ■ Harold Pinter

BORN: 1930, London, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry, screenplays

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Birthday Party* (1957)

*The Caretaker* (1959)

*The Homecoming* (1964)

*Landscape* (1967)

*Betrayal* (1978)

### Overview

English playwright Harold Pinter ranks among the foremost postwar British dramatists. He invested his plays with an atmosphere of fear, horror, and mystery. These plays continue to encourage scrutiny and reexamination from not only the author himself, but from scholars as well. Pinter's works remain among the most respected plays written for the modern stage.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Working-Class London Roots** Harold Pinter was born October 30, 1930, in Hackney, East London, England, the only son of a Jewish tailor, Jack, and mother Frances. He grew up in a working-class neighborhood that, despite dilapidated housing, railway yards, and a dirty canal, he remembers fondly. However, like other English children who grew up in London during the German air raids of World War II, he learned firsthand about living with imminent and omnipresent terror, a theme that appears in much of his work. Relocation in 1940 and 1941—from London to Cornwall and Reading,



Harold Pinter AP Images

as part of the evacuation of civilians from bombing targets during the war—would also affect his writing.

**Early Theatrical Work** Pinter's theatrical career started early. While attending Hackney Downs Grammar School on scholarship, he won title roles in *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Reviews of these early performances point to Pinter's gift for the dramatic.

Also appearing early was his skill with words, which not only launched his career as a writer, but also helped him survive the streets and alleys of the East End. He recalled in a *Paris Review* interview with Lawrence M. Bensky, "If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also, I went to a Jewish club by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. There were one or two ways of getting out of it—one was purely physical, of course, but you couldn't do anything about the milk bottles—we didn't have any milk bottles. The best way was to talk to them, you know,

sort of ‘Are you all right?’ ‘Yes, I’m all right.’ ‘Well, that’s all right then, isn’t it?’ and all the time keep walking toward the lights of the main road.”

Pinter left grammar school in 1947, having earned a grant to study acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) the following year. At RADA, a place he detested, he cut classes, faked a nervous breakdown, and after two terms, finally dropped out in 1949. At the same time, Pinter was called to National Service, but instead registered as a conscientious objector. For this he was taken to trial and fined.

In 1951, after another grueling six months at the Central School of Speech and Drama, he joined the Anew McMaster repertory company, touring England and Ireland and performing in over a dozen roles. The next year he took regional acting jobs in England, followed by work for the Donald Wolfit Company, which continued from 1953 through 1954. Under the stage name David Baron (after his grandmother, whose maiden name was Baron), Pinter supplemented his meager income for the next five years by waiting tables, making postal deliveries, working as a bouncer, and shoveling snow.

**From Stage to Radio, Radio to Big Screen** During this time, in 1956, Pinter married actress Vivian Merchant. He gave up writing poetry and began writing the plays that would, by 1957, establish his career. That year he completed two one-act plays, *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*, as well as the full-length play *The Birthday Party*. All three plays would lend themselves to future adaptations, several awards and accolades, and the tormenting-villain-versus-tormented-victim dynamic present in many of Pinter’s works.

Pinter had his first real success with *The Caretaker* (1960), which ran for twelve months in London’s West End and in October 1961 opened on Broadway to critical, even though not commercial, success. Subsequent plays and themes—invasion, cruelty, infidelity, threat—would contribute to Pinter’s acclaim with *The Dwarfs* (derived from his novel and appearing on radio in 1960); two television plays for the stage, *The Collection* (1961) and *The Lover* (1963); and the full-length play *The Homecoming* (1965). Those same years also saw his work being produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). His story “The Tea Party” premiered in 1964 and was televised throughout Europe the following year. *The Basement* aired in 1967.

In 1973 Pinter was made the Associate Director of the National Theatre, a post he would hold until 1983. After his first marriage dissolved, in 1980 he married British historian and novelist Lady Antonia Fraser. It was also during this period that he was at his most prolific. Between 1975 and 1995, Pinter wrote nine full-length plays for stage and television, a dramatic sketch, four prose works, four poetry collections, and eleven screenplays, including the screenplay for John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, which earned

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pinter’s famous contemporaries include:

**Clifford Brown** (1930–1956): American jazz trumpeter who died young, leaving a brief but remarkable recording legacy.

**Ingmar Bergman** (1918–2007): Influential Swedish screenwriter and film and stage director known for such films as *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and *The Seventh Seal* (1958).

**Philip Larkin** (1922–1985): Twentieth-century English poet who was once deemed by readers the nation’s best-loved poet.

**Timothy Leary** (1920–1996): An American psychologist and countercultural phenomenon who famously experimented with and wrote about his use of hallucinogenic drugs like LSD.

Pinter several award nominations and won him the David Di Donatello (the Italian Academy Award) for Best Foreign Screenplay.

Over the ensuing decade, a winner of nine film awards and a double-digit nominee, Pinter’s writing has evolved, from verbal indulgence to a greater emphasis on scene-setting. This increasing influence of scenery playwriting is apparently due to his increased involvement in film. After writing several plays that were subsequently filmed, he wrote screenplays that have garnered continued acclaim. These have made use of his linguistic skills and devices and have addressed his own penchant for themes such as adultery, duplicity, artistic stasis, and homosexuality.

Pinter’s screenplays along with his poetry and letters, thrillers, and stage plays have earned him a major place in drama. Critics and scholars alike consider many of his full-length plays to be among the most important plays of the mid-twentieth century. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors for his lifetime achievement, including the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature. He has remained active in the worlds of publishing, theater, and film, even after his announced retirement in 2005. Pinter continues to be applauded by everyone, from the British Library, which has purchased his literary archive, to Pinter scholars and fans who appreciate his rigorous scrutiny of the common, the comic, and the classes.

### Works in Literary Context

**Intrusion and Conflict** What Pinter learned as a young actor, he turned into his writing. His characters—making up the largest part of dramatic tension in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many of Pinter's plays attempt to portray working-class characters in realistic situations using natural speech patterns. Other dramas about working-class characters include:

*Look Back in Anger* (1956), a play by John Osborne. A lower-class husband and his upper-class wife get disturbingly ensnared in a triangle with a third protagonist. *A Taste of Honey* (1958), a play by Shelagh Delaney. This drama features the dynamics of a working-class teen and her sexually promiscuous and neglectful mother who abandons her. *A View from the Bridge* (1955), a play by Arthur Miller. Italian-American longshoreman Eddie Carbone suffers profound betrayals and conflicts with family and friends in this stage drama.

the plays—are at their most compelling when their conflicts are “inner” and “mental,” unseeable and therefore frequently unnameable. Often, because the past is unverifiable in a Pinter play, all that viewers can know about a Pinter character is what they themselves discern. The plots, despite their surface calm, are often spiked by what audiences find equally disturbing: the unexpected intruder who enters the rooms or houses of Pinter’s characters and in some way disrupts the residents’ lives.

**The Comedy of Menace** Pinter’s first few plays, labeled “comedies of menace,” occur in confining spaces and bleak settings and feature lower-class characters with their Cockney idiom who surrender what is left of their individuality. In Pinter’s later plays he is especially concerned with what he regards as the nearly impossible task of verifying appearances. He creates images of the human condition that are despairing yet also comic in his deft handling of dialogue that attacks, evades communication, and shields privacy with debasing non sequiturs, pat clichés, repetitions, contradictions, and bad syntax.

**Influences** It has been said that epic theater appeared to have the least influence on Pinter, who shunned such Bertolt Brecht conventions as having his characters and themes make implied social and political statements. In one or two plays, he does touch on social commentary, in an epiclike fashion, appealing to his audience’s intellect rather than to its emotions. This is where Pinter shows multiple influences. Examining the private rather than the social sphere, Pinter’s work shows the particular absurdist influence of, for example, Irish playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett. He also displays a similarity with Kafka and other existential writers, exposing, as he does in several plays, the fragmentation of attitude, thinking,

and, therefore, the self. Considered to belong to no single school, Pinter has instead drawn from each to create a body of work idiosyncratically and recognizably his own. Those dramatic elements that are identifiably “Pinteresque” include his characters’ mysterious pasts, his theme of the intruder, and his use of silence.

Pinter has been thought to take some influence from renowned writers Wilfred Owen, Marcel Proust, and William Shakespeare. In turn, Pinter’s work unquestionably influenced a number of contemporary dramatists, from realists to international surrealists, from English playwrights Michael Frayn and Patrick Marber and American playwright David Mamet to Irish dramatist Martin McDonagh and Czech writer Václav Havel.

### Works in Critical Context

While some have praised Pinter’s work for its originality, others have dismissed it as willfully obscure. Such responses have been evoked by the plays’ unconventional plots and character development, their inexplicable logic and inconclusive resolutions, and their distinctive dialogue, echoing the inanities of everyday speech, including its silences. Pinter plays, these critics have determined, recall the social, psychological, and linguistic verisimilitude (realism) found in “kitchen sink” drama, yet are of a surface realism. As Martin Esslin pointed out in *Pinter the Playwright, a Realistic Dramatist*: “This is the paradox of his artistic personality. The dialogue and the characters are real, but the over-all effect is one of mystery, of uncertainty, of poetic ambiguity.”

Enthusiastic dramatic criticism was plentiful for Pinter, especially with such plays as *The Caretaker*.

**The Caretaker (1959)** Pinter’s second full-length play received high accolades, but only in the context of his first. After *The Birthday Party*’s lackluster debut (running for only one week), for example, *Observer* critic Kenneth Tynan commented that with *The Caretaker*, “Pinter has begun to fulfill the promise that I signally failed to see in *The Birthday Party* two years ago. The latter play was a clever fragment grown dropsical with symbolic content.... In *The Caretaker* symptoms of paranoia are still detectable... but... considerably abated; and the symbols have mostly retired to the background. What remains is a play about people.”

*The Caretaker*—which ran for twelve months in London’s West End and in October 1961 opened on Broadway to critical acclaim—prompted *New York Times* writer Howard Taubman to report that it “proclaims its young English author as one of the important playwrights of our day.”

### Responses to Literature

1. While reading *The Dumb Waiter*, make note of all the props (objects) that appear in the play as well as any response you have to their appearance. Using your list of props, discuss what you associate with

- each. Name any associations at all, no matter how simple. For example, sheets may make you think of bed, laundry hanging on the line, or toga parties. Once you have cited all possible connections you have to each item, consider how each has meaning for the play. Pinter's props have been said to "resonate symbolically." What do you think these items represent? Feelings? Tone? Memories? Attitudes?
- Pinter's language is notably and intentionally provocative. His style is actually tactical, in that language becomes almost like a weapon, probing his audience. Using the play *The Homecoming*, find several instances of such passages and discuss whether these tactics would be equally provocative with a contemporary audience. How are audiences different today from Pinter's time, which is actually quite recent?

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## Luigi Pirandello

BORN: 1867, Agirgenti, Sicily, Italy

DIED: 1936, Rome, Italy

NATIONALITY: Italian

GENRE: Drama, fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Late Mattia Pascal* (1904)

*Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921)

*Henry IV* (1922)

### Overview

Luigi Pirandello was a controversial artist whose work traversed many genres and media. He was, first and foremost, a dramatist, but he was also a novelist, an essayist, a poet, and a painter. Pirandello is world famous for his plays that explore the relationship between reality, sanity,



Luigi Pirandello *Pirandello, Luigi*, photograph. AP Images.

and identity. He often portrayed characters who adopt multiple identities, or "masks," in an effort to reconcile social demands with personal needs.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**An Early Love of the Theater** Pirandello was born on June 28, 1867, in Girgenti, Sicily to Stefano and Caterina Pirandello. His father, a prosperous sulfur merchant, initially sent him to study commerce at the local technical institute. However, Pirandello lacked interest in the subject and transferred to an academic secondary school, where he excelled in oratory and literature. He began writing at a young age and by the time he was twelve had, with siblings and friends, produced his first play, *Barbaro*. He also wrote poetry and fiction, publishing his first poem in 1883 and his first story a year later. After graduation, Pirandello attended university first in Palermo, then in Rome. During his stay in Rome, he became an avid theatergoer. In 1889 he moved to Germany to continue his studies at the University of Bonn, where he earned a doctorate in Romance philology. He then returned to Rome, living on an allowance from his father while trying to establish himself as a writer.

**Loss and Madness** In 1894, Pirandello married Antonietta Portulano, the daughter of a business partner. The couple settled in Rome and had three children. To support his family, Pirandello was forced to increase his literary output and to take a position as professor at a women's school. In 1904 he saw his first critical success with the novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*), but this was overshadowed when his father's sulfur mines, in which Pirandello was heavily invested, were destroyed in a flood. All of Pirandello's wealth, including his wife's dowry, was wiped out. Upon hearing the news, Antonietta suffered an emotional collapse; she subsequently became

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pirandello's famous contemporaries include:

**T. S. Eliot** (1888–1965): American-born Eliot spent much of his writing career in England and became a British citizen in 1927, at the age of thirty-nine. He is the author of acknowledged classic poems such as "The Waste Land" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

**James Joyce** (1882–1941): One of the greatest and best-known novelists of the modernist period in literature, Irish-born Joyce is particularly famous for his epic novel *Ulysses*.

**Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945): Leader of the Italian Fascist Party and primary European ally of Hitler's Germany during World War II, Mussolini came to a gruesome end with the end of the war itself.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt** (1882–1945): U.S. president for most of World War II and the greatest ally of "Free Europe" in the United States, Roosevelt was the only U.S. president elected to serve four terms, from 1933 until his death in 1945.

**Bertrand Russell** (1872–1970): A prolific British writer, Russell was a well-respected philosopher and an outspoken pacifist. Later in life, he devoted his considerable energies to campaigning against the proliferation of nuclear arms.

obsessively jealous and delusional. Pirandello choose to keep his wife at home, but ultimately had her committed to an asylum in 1919. During these difficult years, Pirandello took refuge in his study, where he lost himself in writing short stories, novels, and essays. He also wrote several plays, but he was unable to get them produced.

**The War Years** Pirandello began working on a play that was much different from his other work. *Liolà*, (performed in 1916, published in 1917; translated, 1952), was clearly an extravaganza for the author who, at the time, was profoundly troubled by the death of his mother and by his wife's descent into madness. Perhaps of even greater consequence, however, was the outbreak of World War I and the decision on the part of his son Stefano to go to war, a decision that led to his eventual internment in Austrian concentration camps. Perhaps because of this overriding sensation of looming death, Pirandello created the character of Liolà: a peasant, but who also stands for beauty, youth, virility, and, most of all, fertility. The play is lively and fresh, and the characters are not torn by internal turmoil, but experience life in a largely joyful manner.

The next phase of Pirandello's writing focused more on plays than novels. A period of intense creativity set in and lasted from 1916 to 1922, culminating in the production of his two greatest works: the dramas *Sei person-*

*aggi in cerca d'autore* (1921; *Six Characters in Search of an Author*) and *Enrico IV* (1922; *Henry IV*). Pirandello quickly went from being an author with a respectable but modest reputation to being one of the major literary figures in Italy.

**Fascism, Mussolini, and the Theater** In the desperate years following World War I, Italy came under the control of ultranationalist dictator Benito Mussolini. Pirandello took advantage of his public prominence to help Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party. Pirandello welcomed and supported Mussolini's regime, believing Mussolini was someone who could bring order and discipline to Italy. Pirandello openly chose to join the Fascist Party immediately after the assassination of the socialist congressman Giacomo Matteotti by Mussolini supporters. In a letter to the pro-Fascist paper *L'imperio*, Pirandello asked to join the party and pledged his "humble obedience" to Mussolini. Mussolini, showing his appreciation for the gesture of support, provided funds for the Arts Theater that Pirandello had established. Pirandello, as producer and director, saw many of his plays first performed in this theater, and he took his company on tour throughout the world. However, the Arts Theater never achieved financial success and was dissolved in 1928. Frustrated by the failure of his theater, by his unsuccessful attempts to establish a government-sponsored National Theater in Rome, and by the decreasing popularity of his plays, Pirandello lived in self-imposed exile for the next five years.

In 1925 Pirandello met Marta Abba, the actress who would serve as the muse for many of his plays and with whom he was in love until his death. The seven plays that he wrote for her all feature women protagonists. They began their relationship as the political climate in Italy became increasingly unbearable. Pirandello decided to leave Italy and spent long periods of time in Berlin and Paris. His direct experience with the staging of his plays and Marta's acting helped him to further cultivate his ideas about the theater and to accept its extraordinary power. For him the theater no longer consisted exclusively of only the playwright's text but also of how the directors, actors, and scenographers interpreted the play on stage.

In 1934 Pirandello won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Though still fighting for a national theater in Rome, Pirandello nonetheless knew that eventually nothing would come of Mussolini's promises and that modern theater had no future in Fascist Italy. He convinced Marta to leave the Italian stage and renew her career in the United States, where, he believed, the theater was respected and loved much more than in Italy. He died in Rome on December 10, 1936.

### Works in Literary Context

**Verism and Naturalism** Pirandello's early works were strongly influenced by *verism* (*vero* means "real" in

Italian), an Italian naturalist movement led by Giovanni Verga. The verists revolted against Romanticism and wrote about real people and real problems, and they included real dialogue. Writing in his native Sicilian dialect, Pirandello chose to describe the landscape and inhabitants of Sicily. His first successful novel, *The Late Mattia Pascal*, displays a distinctly verist and naturalistic style.

**The Mask: Reality and Illusion** In an essay titled *On Humor*, which he dedicated “To the Memory of Mattia Pascal, Librarian,” Pirandello articulated the major aesthetic principle that guided his work: humorism. Pirandello’s theory of humorism is based upon his vision of the conflict between surface appearances and deeper realities. According to Pirandello, when an opposition exists between a character’s situation and an audience’s expectations, the audience gains an “awareness” of this opposition, and the situation appears comic. When the audience additionally recognizes a character’s suffering beneath the comic appearance, the audience gains a “sentiment” or “feeling” of this opposition. Catharsis occurs when, through a combination of opposing reactions, the audience achieves both a compassionate understanding of the character’s situation in the fictional world and a deeper insight into the real world. Pirandello was thus more interested in the audience’s direct emotional experience of the drama than in the purely abstract and philosophical aspects of his plays.

Pirandello described his dramatic works as a “theater of mirrors” in which the audience sees what passes on stage as a reflection of their own lives: When his characters doubt their own perceptions of themselves, the audience experiences a simultaneous crisis of self-perception. In questioning the distinction between sanity and madness, Pirandello attacked abstract models of objective reality and theories of a static human personality. For these reasons, many critics have labeled him a pessimist and a relativist. Others, noting the strong sense of compassion that Pirandello conveys for his characters, contend that Pirandello is not preaching a definable ideology but is simply expressing his acute consciousness of the absurdities and paradoxes of human life. As Pirandello explained: “My works are born from live images which are the perennial source of art, but these images pass through a veil of concepts which have taken hold of me. My works of art are never concepts trying to express themselves through images. On the contrary. They are images, often very vivid images of life, which, fostered by the labors of my mind, assume universal significance quite on their own, through the formal unity of art.”

### Works in Critical Context

**The Danger of Criticism** After writing *Henry IV*, Pirandello read a discussion of his plays in Adriano Tilgher’s *Studies in Contemporary Theater*, and the remainder of his

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Pirandello’s deep involvement with Mussolini’s brutal Fascist regime in Italy makes him one of a number of prominent artistic figures who found themselves fascinated by both Italian and German fascism. Here are a few other works by authors and filmmakers fascinated with totalitarian systems:

*The Cantos* (1915–1962), a poem by Ezra Pound. This poem has been the subject of much controversy over the years, drawing heavy fire for its implicit and overt anti-Semitism, as well as for its role in Pound’s development and elaboration of a Fascist political and economic perspective.

*Triumph of the Will* (1935), a film by Leni Riefenstahl. This disturbing propaganda movie of a National Socialist Congress in Germany was the height of film technique and artistic sensibility—in the service of the basest of agendas, which Riefenstahl appears to have enthusiastically supported.

*Journey to the End of the Night* (1931), a novel by Louis-Ferdinand Céline. This novel chronicles the life of a misadventurer who stumbles through both war and peace with a savage, laughing hatred for humanity.

career as a playwright was influenced by this critic’s perception of his work. Tilgher saw in Pirandello’s dramas a consistent and compelling philosophical formula that explained the often confusing and contradictory elements of these works, and this vision of his artistry came to haunt Pirandello perhaps as madness had haunted his wife.

Tilgher wrote: “The philosophy implicit in Pirandello’s art revolves round the fundamental dualism of Life and Form: Life, perpetually mobile and fluid, which cannot help developing into a form, although it deeply resents all form; and Form which determines Life, by giving it rigid and precise borders, and freezes it, suppressing its restless motion.” Pirandello was pleased by the academic authority that Tilgher’s essay gave to his dramas, and he was stimulated to approach more intently the life/form dichotomy in his works.

Many critics have blamed this aim for a decline in the quality of Pirandello’s later plays, which were viewed as overly intellectual, obscure, and lacking emotional vitality. Tilgher himself later wrote that “it would have been better if Pirandello had never read my essay. It is never good for a writer to be too conscious of his inner world, and my essay fixed Pirandello’s world in such clear and well-defined terms that Pirandello must have felt imprisoned in it, hence his protests that he was an artist and not a philosopher . . . and hence his attempts to escape. But the more he tried to escape from the critical pigeon-holes

into which I had placed him the more he shut himself into them." Pirandello was bitterly disappointed by the critical and popular failure of his later dramas, a disappointment only partially mitigated by winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1934. However, after his death, critics began to question the utility and appropriateness of the life/form dichotomy as the principal critical approach to Pirandello's works, and the rise of existentialist theory and of the Theater of the Absurd did much to alter the context of the debate on Pirandello.

**The Contemporary Perspective** Pirandello is today viewed with a more sophisticated appreciation for his philosophical themes and with near universal esteem for all his works, including his later dramas. What was previously scorned as overly intellectual and incoherent is now respected for its provocative treatment of relativism and antirationalism. Pirandello foresaw the abatement of the critical controversy that he inspired during his lifetime, and he looked to that time when his works would be judged according to the artistic terms in which they were created.

**Six Characters in Search of an Author** When *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was first performed in 1921, audiences were so shocked by its unconventional style that it caused riots. Although it ultimately proved successful with audiences, critics were initially less impressed. In the decades following its initial run, however, critics have come to recognize the work for its importance in the development of modern theater. According to scholar Anna Balakian, the point of the work was simple: "Pirandello wants to break down the rules the better to preserve the theater." Umberto Mariani refers to it as a "revolutionary play" and notes, "Pirandello's *Six Characters* reveals itself from the outset as thematically much more complex than his earlier masterpieces and far more original in form vis-à-vis the bourgeois theater at the turn of the century." Fiora A. Bassanese calls the work "his greatest and most essential play."

## Responses to Literature

1. In a short essay, describe the humor Pirandello uses in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Explain how humor, irony, and unconventional form highlight the theme of the play.
2. Research the idea of "reality-testing," a psychological phenomenon discerned by Sigmund Freud and many others. How can this concept help you better understand the behavior of the characters in one or more of Pirandello's plays? What emotional effect do you think these characters' reality-testing is likely to have on viewers or readers of the play(s)?
3. Examine Pirandello's idea of the mask as an obstacle to mutual understanding between human beings. As a class, discuss specific statements by Pirandello on

this theme, and explore the way the idea plays out in one of his dramas.

4. Use one of Pirandello's plays to consider the concepts of truth, identity, and sanity. Discuss how Pirandello presents his message, either through the characters or through the play's form.

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## Plato

BORN: 427 BCE, Athens, Greece

DIED: 347 BCE, Athens, Greece

NATIONALITY: Greek

GENRE: Nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Republic* (c. 360 BCE)

*Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE)

*Symposium* (385 BCE)

*Euthyphro* (399 BCE)

*Apology* (c. 399 BCE)

## Overview

Plato stands at the center of philosophical thought in the ancient world. He was the first person to approach philosophical issues systematically, but it was the genius with which he treated those issues that made his thought so influential. Virtually every philosopher in antiquity who lived after Plato offered a response to what he had written. Moreover, Plato's influence was hardly limited to the ancient world. His thought was studied throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and continues to be crucial to an understanding of philosophical issues. Although the accuracy of his doctrines has always been



Plato Mansell / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images

the subject of vigorous debate, no one can deny Plato's pervasive influence on the history of Western philosophy.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Life** Plato was born in Athens, the son of Ariston and Perictione, both of Athenian aristocratic ancestry. He lived at a time when ancient Greece was considered the most powerful empire in the known world; the Greek Empire consisted of many city-states, such as Athens and Sparta. Athens was one of the most important regions of ancient Greece, functioning as a center of both political power and cultural advancement. Plato lived his whole life in Athens but did travel to Sicily and southern Italy on several occasions, and one story says he traveled to Egypt. Little is known of his early years, but he was given the finest education Athens had to offer its noble families.

**The Influence of Socrates** Plato's acquaintance with Socrates altered the course of his life. The compelling power that Socrates' methods and arguments had over the minds of the youth of Athens gripped Plato as firmly

as it did so many others, and he became a close associate of Socrates.

The end of the Peloponnesian War (404 BCE), which resulted in Athens being taken over by Sparta and its allies, left Plato in a difficult position. His uncle Critias was the leader of the Thirty Tyrants, a group that had been appointed to power by the victorious Spartans. One way of manifesting their power was to indict as many Athenians as possible for treason. As documented in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates was ordered to arrest a man and take him from Salamis to Athens for execution. When the great teacher refused, his life was in jeopardy, and he was probably saved only by the overthrow of the Thirty and the reestablishment of democracy. Plato had been repelled by the purpose and methods of the Thirty and welcomed the restoration of democracy to Athens.

Four years later, when Socrates was tried and sentenced to death, Plato was present at the trial, as evidenced by the *Apology*. Although Plato was not present when the hemlock (a fatal poison) was administered to his master, he describes the scene in vivid and touching detail in the *Phaedo*. Disgusted by what had transpired, Plato turned away from contemporary Athenian politics and never took an active part in government, although he did, through friends, try to influence the course of politics in the Sicilian city of Syracuse.

**Journeys** Plato and several of his friends left Athens after Socrates' death and sojourned with Euclides in Megara. Highly productive during this time, Plato wrote *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Gorgias*. Socrates is the main character in all of these dialogues, and various abstractions are discussed, including courage, piety, and friendship. The *Apology* and *Crito* stand apart from other works of Plato's in that they deal with historical events: Socrates' trial and the period between his conviction and execution.

During his first trip to southern Italy and Syracuse in 388–387 BCE, Plato made the acquaintance of Dion of Syracuse and his infamous brother-in-law, Dionysius I, ruler of Syracuse. Dionysius was at the height of his power and prestige in Sicily for having freed the Greeks there from the threat of Carthaginian rule. Plato became better friends with Dion, however, and Dionysius, it appears, was jealous of the relationship between Plato and Dion. On Plato's return journey to Athens, Dionysius's crew deposited him on the island of Aegina, which at that time was engaged in a minor war with Athens. Plato would most likely have been sold as a prisoner of war had he not been ransomed by Anniceris of Cyrene, one of his many admirers.

**Return to Athens** After his return to Athens, Plato began to teach in the Gymnasium Academe and soon acquired property nearby. There he founded his famous Academy, which survived until philosophical schools were closed by the Christian emperor Justinian in the early sixth century CE. At the center of the Academy stood a shrine to the Muses, and at least one modern scholar

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Plato's famous contemporaries include:

**Socrates** (470–399 BCE): In addition to being Plato's mentor, Socrates is widely considered the father of Western philosophy.

**Aristotle** (384–322 BCE): Aristotle was Plato's favorite student, and for many centuries after Aristotle's death, Aristotle's legacy was so great that he was known simply as The Philosopher.

**Aristophanes** (456–c. 386 BCE): Aristophanes was an Athenian comic dramatist who wrote *Lysistrata*, a play about government by women.

**Alexander of Macedonia** (also known as Alexander the Great) (356–323 BCE): Alexander was a Macedonian king who, in his brief thirty-three-year life, vastly increased the size of his kingdom and built a lasting reputation as a conqueror.

**Democritus** (460–370 BCE): Although little is known about Democritus, his most important theory was that all matter is composed of what he called "atoms."

**Dionysius I** (432–367 BCE): This ruler conquered a number of cities and states, including Syracuse, which he turned into a Greek colony.

suggests that the Academy may have been a type of religious brotherhood.

**The Republic** Socrates is again the main character in Plato's *Republic*, although this work is less a dialogue than a long discussion by Socrates of justice and what it means to the individual and the city-state. The great utopian state is described only as an analogy for the soul in order for men to understand better how the soul might achieve the kind of balance and harmony necessary for the rational element to control it. Just as there are three elements to the soul—the rational, the less rational, and the impulsive irrational—so are there three classes in the state: the rulers, the guardians, and the workers. No matter what their class, all citizens receive an education appropriate to their abilities. The rulers are not a hereditary clan or wealthy upper class, but are those who have emerged from the population as a whole as the most intellectually gifted. The guardians serve society by keeping order and by handling the practical matters of government, including fighting wars, while the workers perform the labor necessary to keep the state running smoothly.

The wisdom, courage, and moderation cultivated by the rulers, guardians, and workers ideally produce justice in society. Only when the three work in harmony, with intelligence and wisdom clearly in control, does the

individual or state achieve the happiness and fulfillment of which it is capable. The *Republic* ends with the great myth of Er, in which the wanderings of the soul through births and rebirths are recounted. According to Plato, one may be freed from the cycle after a time through lives of greater and greater spiritual and intellectual purity.

**Death** Plato's second trip to Syracuse took place in 367 BCE after the death of Dionysius I, but Plato and Dion's efforts to influence the development of Dionysius II along the lines laid down in the *Republic* did not succeed, and Plato returned to Athens. Plato's third and final voyage to Syracuse was made some time before 357 BCE, and he was no more successful in his attempts to influence the young Dionysius than he had been earlier. Dion fared no better and was exiled by the young tyrant, while Plato was held in semi-captivity. Plato's "Seventh Letter," the only one in the collection of thirteen letters considered authentic—perhaps even from the hand of Plato himself—recounts his role in the events surrounding the death of Dion, who returned to Syracuse and overthrew Dionysius in 357 BCE. The "Seventh Letter" is of even more interest because of Plato's statement that the deepest truths may not be communicated.

Although the date is not exactly known, Apollodorus's *Chronology* (late second century BCE) recorded Plato's death as 347 BCE at the age of eighty-one. When Plato died, he was succeeded at the head of the Academy, not by Aristotle, who had been a student and then a teacher at the Academy for about twenty years, but by his nephew, Speusippus. As noted above, the Academy continued for centuries after Plato's death.

### Works in Literary Context

Plato was a student of philosophy, and his literary output reflects this role. His works fuse the arguments of Heraclitus, Socrates, and the Pythagoreans (those who followed the mathematician Pythagoras). Whatever other influences have been claimed, there can be little doubt that it was Socrates who had the most profound impact on Plato.

**Socrates** Plato chooses Socrates as the main character in most of his works, a clear reflection of Plato's reverence for the man he regarded as his true master. In the "Seventh Letter," Plato deemed Socrates "the most just man alive" during the reign of the Thirty Tyrants in Athens. Diogenes reports that the interest was mutual: he tells the story of Socrates' dream of a swan sitting on his knees, which all at once sprouted feathers and flew away after crying out a loud, sweet call. The next day, Plato was introduced to Socrates as a pupil, and Socrates believed the young man was the swan in his dream.

It is the relationship that Plato had with Socrates, in fact, that has been memorialized in Plato's dialogues, his largest contribution to literature. In form, these dialogues are merely representations of conversations held between

two or more people. In content, they demonstrate and record the philosophies Socrates taught his pupils. Indeed, Plato's dialogues have been staples of education ever since their rediscovery in the late medieval period. However, the objectivity of Plato's representation of Socrates' character and philosophy has come into question through the years.

Diogenes reports in his *Lives* that there was a rivalry or animosity between Plato and several fellow philosophers and literary figures, especially other "Socratics," including Xenophon, Antisthenes, Aristippus, and Aeschines. It is certain that each of these men also wrote "Socratic dialogues," though only those of Xenophon and Plato exist in complete form. It is important to note that the Socratic dialogues written by others deviate significantly from Plato's in their philosophies and their portraits of Socrates.

**Legacy** The Academy continued for centuries after Plato's death, though its members deviated from Platonic teachings in several striking ways. Within a century (c. 276 BCE) the school had become a center for the philosophy of the Skeptics under Archesilaus. Revivals of some versions of Platonism were undertaken both at the Academy itself under Antiochus of Ascalon (c. 87 BCE) and elsewhere; for example, "Middle Platonism" developed at the same time in Athens and Alexandria (which included Plutarch). So-called Neoplatonism began with Plotinus in Rome and continued until Justinian closed the pagan schools in 529 CE. In many ways, Neoplatonism continued to provide a significant source of ideas for later medieval thinkers.

Plato's influence, though transformed and reshaped by the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists, can be found later in the conceptions of temporal order and eternity in Augustine and Boethius, and in other ideas among the medieval rationalists, especially Anselm. The Platonic conception of knowledge as derived from and secured by innate and infallible cognitive capacities—which make contact with a truth or reality that is independent of the human senses—continued after the Enlightenment in the philosophies of what have come to be known as the Continental Rationalists, most notably René Descartes, Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It echoes even later in the transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant, the British idealist Francis Herbert Bradley, and, later still, in the American transcendentalists, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson.

### Works in Critical Context

In considering the work of Plato, it is first important to note that Socrates, his illustrious teacher, wrote no text in which he outlined his teachings. Consequently, what scholars know about Socrates can be gleaned only from those who wrote about his work. This fact, along with Plato's repeated use of Socrates as his main character, has led to several seemingly irresolvable scholarly disputes.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

While Plato's *Republic* covers a number of topics, the text outlines an idealized manifestation of both an individual and the surrounding government. As such, it reads as a manual or guidebook. Other artists have taken on the task of delineating the proper structure of government and the individuals who run it. Here are a few of the results:

*The Prince* (1532), a treatise by Niccolò Machiavelli. This work describes the role of a country's leader, based on Machiavelli's belief that a country must be stable above all else, even if a leader must behave ruthlessly to achieve that stability.

*Utopia* (1516), a treatise by Thomas More. The word *utopia* means "no-place," and so underscores the impractical nature of the fictional island culture More describes.

*The Leviathan* (1651), a treatise by Thomas Hobbes. This text describes Hobbes's "social contract theory"—the mutual obligation of individuals to help other individuals and how these obligations become the foundations of societies.

Does the character Socrates actually speak for Plato himself, who articulates his own thoughts through Socrates? Or does Plato seek only to represent the philosophy of Socrates by recounting the conversations of Socrates? Plato's student Aristotle often wrote as if he believed that the Socrates whom Plato employs is expressing Plato's own philosophy. Never a speaking character in his own dialogues, Plato speaks for himself only in the "Letters", and the authenticity of these is disputed. It has been argued, in fact, that readers should never assume that Plato is presenting dogmatic pronouncements; instead, he is using the dialogue form simply to offer arguments for consideration. This issue is an important one for scholars because Socrates is largely considered the father of philosophy as we know it.

**What Is Plato, What Is Socrates?** Although a decisive resolution of the many debates about Plato's relationship with Socrates is not likely to be achieved, certain points of view seem well enough supported to be agreed upon by scholars in general. Perhaps the most important point concerns the dating of the dialogues. Partly because of the strategies used for dating the pieces, some separation of the Platonic and Socratic philosophies has been made on the supposition that Plato became more the master of his own philosophical thinking and less influenced by Socrates as he matured.

Several approaches to ordering the dialogues chronologically have been attempted. In antiquity, the

orderings were thematic at best and included many works whose authenticity is now disputed or unanimously rejected. Historical evidence for ordering the works chronologically is relatively slight. Aristotle, Diogenes, and Olympiodorus of Alexandria all report that the *Laws* was written after the *Republic*. Beyond this, scholars must speculate about the chronology of the dialogues based on the slight evidence contained within each of Plato's works.

Despite the lack of direct evidence, modern scholars have found sufficient differences in the philosophies articulated in the dialogues to group them into different periods: early—those works written prior to Plato's first trip to Sicily in 387; middle—the dialogues from about 387 BCE to 380 BCE, considered to be early transitional; and late-transitional dialogues beginning about 360 BCE to 355 BCE. In his influential study *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Gregory Vlastos finds ten significant differences between the Socrates in the dialogues of the early period and the Socrates in the dialogues of the middle period. Arguments of this sort have generally found favor among scholars who are inclined to find the differences in Plato's characterizations significant in terms of his movement away from the philosophical methods and preoccupations of the historical Socrates, which these scholars assume to have been represented more or less accurately in Plato's earlier works. Still, each of these differences between the Socrates of the early and middle dialogues will no doubt continue to be hotly debated. Interestingly, the division of the dialogues into groups on the basis of their contents has more recently received support from what is known as stylometry—the careful measure of certain stylistic features of the writings themselves.

While the early, middle, and late groupings are accepted by many scholars, serious debate continues about the exact placement of each dialogue within these groups and even about the merits of the different methods employed to group them at all. Furthermore, a great many other dialogues and some thirteen letters have also been attributed to Plato over the years, but none of these other writings has been regarded by a consensus as authentic. Many were presumed to be so in antiquity and have only relatively recently been removed from the canon. These disputed works are known as the *dubia*. Still other dialogues, called the *spuria*, were attributed to Plato but suspected to be fraudulent even in antiquity.

The majority view among scholars on this issue is that the early Platonic dialogues contain a certain highly coherent set of philosophical positions, so it makes sense to think of this philosophy on its own terms, distinct from the philosophy found in the middle-period dialogues. Scholars often call the philosophy in the early dialogues "Socratic philosophy" and the philosophy of the middle dialogues "Platonic philosophy." This strategy partly permits an easy shorthand for the distinction between the

two philosophies and partly reflects an acknowledgment that the philosophy of Plato's early dialogues is the most interesting and plausible candidate for the philosophy of the historical Socrates. Indeed, if the philosophy of Plato's Socrates is not the philosophy of the historically real Socrates, then the philosophy of the historical Socrates must be associated with the views attributed to him by other Socratic authors, whose work seems ordinary compared with that of Plato, or the philosophy of the historical Socrates must be considered lost. Any serious philosophical interest in Socrates, then, is to be found in the philosophy of Plato's Socrates in the early dialogues.

#### ***Continued Critical Use of Plato's Dialogues***

Despite the continued debate about the nature of Plato's writings, they continue to be read in philosophy, justice, and history courses alike because the works pose philosophical problems and questions that remain intricate enough to challenge those who think critically about serious issues. Plato's Socrates asks many of what are considered the quintessential questions of philosophy. He asks them in ways that are readily understood, and Plato has him ask those questions in dramatic settings that make them even more compelling. In short, whether Plato has accurately represented the historical Socrates or not, the dialogues as a starting point for further conversations about important and unresolved issues of justice, piety, science, mathematics, and politics ensure Plato's continued relevance as a leader of philosophical and intellectual awareness.

#### **Responses to Literature**

1. Read book seven of Plato's *Republic*. This portion of the *Republic* contains the "Allegory of the Cave," which describes the necessity of seeing the world in a new way, of opening one's mind up to the truth that hides behind the illusions of this world. Describe your feelings in response to this text. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the world when you conclude the "Allegory"? Do you believe that the world is a kind of illusion that hides other, more profound truths? Why or why not?
2. Research the word *utopia*. What do you think an ideal world would be like? Describe some of this ideal world's key features—for instance, what would this world's art, government, and religion be like? Describe the fashion and sports of this world.
3. Plato's dialogues are famous for their representations of the so-called Socratic method: Socrates's unique style of argument—his way of asking his "opponent" many questions, cleverly establishing definitions of terms, and then guiding his opponent into making his points for him. Choose a controversial issue and write your own Socratic dialogue, in the style of Plato, in which one character plays the Socrates role and argues his point by asking questions of the other.

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 **Li Po**

BORN: 701 CE, China

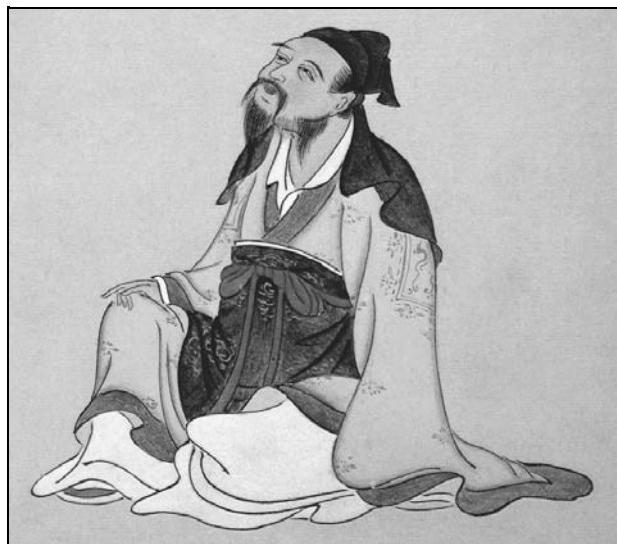
DIED: 762 CE, China

NATIONALITY: Chinese

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Works of Li Po, the Chinese Poet* (1922)



Li Po © The British Library / HIP / The Image Works

## Overview

Li Po, one of the most popular Chinese poets, was noted for his romantic songs on wine, women, and nature. His writings reflect the grandeur of the Tang dynasty at the height of its prosperity. Li Po is one of the great figures of Chinese literature, a poet whose adventurous life is mirrored in his verses. Few readers of Chinese literature have been able to resist his charm.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Precocious Youth** Li Po was most likely born in central Asia, where his ancestors had lived in exile since the early seventh century. When he was about five, his father, a businessman, and his mother, a washerwoman, successfully petitioned the authorities for permission to move to the city of Chang Ming in Szechwan Province, a more industrialized and cosmopolitan community.

The precocious Li Po started his poetic compositions early in childhood but was bored by formal education. He tended to concentrate on esoteric religious and literary works rather than the Confucian Classics, although he certainly read and was familiar with the latter. He received a diploma from the Taoist master Kao Tien-Shih in recognition of his Taoist studies; Taoism emphasizes a connection with nature, compassion for people and other living things, and self-discipline. In 720, his exceptional abilities were recognized by the governor of his province, who predicted that he would become a famous poet.

**Adventure Seeker** After a turbulent adolescence, during which he was an adventurer and a sword fighter, Li Po became interested in more contemplative pursuits. Between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, he lived as a recluse in a remote part of Szechwan Province, there acquiring even more of a reputation for wisdom and literary ability. Now emotionally as well as intellectually mature, he resolved to broaden his horizons by seeing what the world outside his native province had to offer.

Except for this period of seclusion in the mountains, Li Po spent his youth in search of adventures abroad. He traveled extensively in Szechwan and, later, in his twenty-fifth year, northward to central China. In 727 he married Hsu Hsin-shih, the daughter of a retired prime minister at An-lu in Hupei, where he stayed the next eight years. Although they had several children and Hsu Hsin-shih seems to have been a model wife, Li's wanderlust was evidently untamed. He continued to ramble about the country, sometimes with his wife and sometimes not, visiting other poets and scholars and becoming something of a legend among his fellow intellectuals. In 735, while traveling in the northern province of Shansi, he saved the life of the soldier Kuo Tzu-i, who would later be pleased to return the favor when he rose in the political ranks.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Po's famous contemporaries include:

- Wu Zetian** (625–705): Empress who seized the throne and began her own dynasty (the Zhou) in the midst of the Tang dynasty.
- Han Gan** (706–783): Tang dynasty-era artist best known for his paintings of horses.
- Tu Fu** (712–770): Friend of Li Po and another of China's great Tang poets.
- Charlemagne** (747–814): Frankish king who led numerous European conquests and is considered the Father of Europe.

**Journeys Abroad and Times at Court** In 735 Li started a long journey that took him northward to the central plains of the Yellow River and eastward to the coastal areas of the Yangtze. This was the most flourishing period of the dynasty and the most prolific time of his life. The climax came in 742, when he went to the capital, Ch'ang-an, and was presented to the emperor, Hsüan-tsung, who honored him personally. Li was appointed a member of the Hanlin Academy and was lionized by fellow scholar-officials. At the zenith of his poetic power, he wrote songs for court festivities. He often frequented taverns and got excessively drunk, earning the reputation, together with seven other notables of the court, as the "Eight Immortals of the Wine-cup." He has been mentioned as one of the "Six Idlers of the Bamboo Brook" as well.

Li Po seems, however, to have offended either a powerful member of the court or perhaps even the emperor himself; in 744, ordered to leave the capital, he resumed his earlier pattern of wandering about the kingdom. In the fall of that year, Li Po met the younger poet Tu Fu, and for a period of two or three years they traveled together, studying at remote Taoist monasteries and exchanging ideas about writing. Tu Fu seems to have been a calming influence upon his friend; he encouraged Li to write down his verses rather than simply declaim them to an admiring circle of drinking companions. Since the two were almost polar opposites in terms of poetry as well as personality, the friendship between them came to be held up as a symbol of how artistic ideals can transcend individual differences.

After parting from Tu Fu, Li Po continued his roaming life, spending most of his time in the southern and western provinces of Kiangsi and Kiangsu Fu, in the eastern capital of Loyang. After having settled his family (he had remarried by this time) in Shantung, Li Po journeyed once again for ten years in northern and eastern China. In the poems of this period, he showed even more interest in Taoism, which replaced his youthful ardor for

chivalry. He was beset, however, by worldly troubles; he began to complain of the lack of money and property.

**Political Uprisings** At the time of the An Lu-shan rebellion in December 755, which shook the Tang empire to its core, Li Po had gone to the Yangtze region, where he had moved his family. He was spared many of the hardships that his fellow poets in the north suffered when the rebels succeeded in capturing Loyang and Ch'ang-an. But a worse fate awaited Li Po.

He was involved for a short while in the unsuccessful uprising of Li Lin, Prince of Yung, who was then commander in chief of the Tang forces in central China. As Li Lin's fleet sailed down the Yangtze, Li Po joined him in Kiukiang in early 757. After the prince's defeat by royalist troops, Li Po was imprisoned and threatened with a death sentence. Eventually, this was lessened to banishment to Yeh-lang (Tsun-i in Kwei-chow) in the remote southwest interior. Li Po traveled slowly to his destination, but amnesty was granted while he was en route. He happily retraced his steps eastward and wandered in the Yangtze area for another two years.

He died in Tang-t'u in southern Anhwei in December 762, and his death, according to legend, was an appropriate one for a lover of wine: drunk in his boat on a beautiful evening, he leaned far over the side to admire his reflection in the water, fell overboard, and drowned. In a culture where the manner of death was just as important as behavior in life, Li Po's passing ensured that he would achieve immortality as both legend and literary genius.

### Works in Literary Context

**Romance and Spirits** An aura of romanticism pervades Li Po's life and poetry. With his fondness for adventure and traveling, his search for alchemy and the elixir of life, and his love of nature, he exemplifies these typical Taoist trends in his poetry. In addition, his work often reflects the kind of melancholy that a man feels when he finds his talents unused and his life wasted.

To drown his sorrows, or just to enjoy himself, Li Po drank heavily. Wine provided him with inspiration for poetry. In those moments of exhilaration, when alone or in company, he would dash off verses without restraint. His finest lyrics are characterized by spontaneity of feeling and lofty imagination. When Taoist recluses discovered that the drinking of wine offered a close approximation of the mental states reached through serious meditation, alcohol soon became a respectable as well as popular means of attuning the senses to the subtle harmonies of nature.

**Taoism** Li Po's early interest in Taoism was one of the most significant influences upon his poetry. Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, respectively, the founder and the chief apostle of this philosophy, emphasized the necessity of living in harmony with the Tao, or Way, giving up the trivial

concerns of conventional life and celebrating instead the virtues of simplicity and directness. Withdrawal from the world was encouraged.

As the poet grew older, however, these mystical expressions gave way to more down-to-earth advice. Just as twentieth-century readers buy self-help books far more frequently than the classic works of religion and philosophy, so did the people of Li Po's day seek practical formulas for attaining peace of mind.

### Works in Critical Context

Li Po's poetry has been highly valued for its consummate grace and original choice of words. He wrote during a period when one of China's most revered dynasties, the Tang, was at the apex of its power and prestige, and his verses seemed to catch the spirit of a self-confident and hedonistic age.

Li Po was a sworn enemy of the mindless conformity to sterile traditions that often characterizes imperial dynasties. He has been compared with Henry Miller, George Gordon, and Lord Byron: the pursuit of pleasure, not some quixotic and suicidal act of rebellion, marked both his life and his work. In verses that were the literary equivalent of Taoism's injunctions to accept the universe rather than strive to change it, he sang the delights of wine, women, and song in spontaneous language that appealed to nobles and ne'er-do-wells alike.

**The Works of Li Po** Among the poems of the Tang period, Li Po's are the most romantic and optimistic, fully reflecting the spirit of his era. Many Chinese children are still taught to recite his five-character quatrain "Quiet Night Thought." The vicissitudes of his life developed his individualism and heightened his ability to empathize with every part of society. His poems display his belief in heroism, his hatred of social injustice, and his desire to remove political power from the hands of the aristocracy. Poems such as "Bring On the Wine" and "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon" seek to eradicate individual loneliness and foster a sense of identity between the individual and the eternal. Expressing both love for and disappointment with life, these poems can make a reader want to laugh and cry at the same time.

Still, some critics have questioned the depth of Li Po's body of work. Arthur Waley, in *The Poetry and Career of Li Po* (1950), contends that the poet "is like most great poets known to the general reader by a relatively small number of pieces. The rest are indeed worth studying.... But much of his work inevitably consisted of slight, complimentary poems addressed to friends at farewell parties or on other social occasions."

### Responses to Literature

1. Ezra Pound was a fan of Li Po. See Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter" and decide why Pound chose that poem to translate.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Despite his attention to hedonistic drinking and mystical connection, Li Po is probably most revered for his depictions of nature. Here are some other works that celebrate the natural world and our interaction with the physical realm around us:

*Leaves of Grass* (1855), poems by Walt Whitman. One of America's first free verse poets, Whitman wrote his most famous collection as a tribute to the wonders of nature and humanity.

*The Starry Night* (1889), by Vincent van Gogh. Perhaps the Dutch painter's most famous painting, it celebrates the night sky amid a whorl of stars.

*The Song of the Earth* (1908–1909), a musical composition by Gustav Mahler. This lengthy and celebrated musical piece emphasizes Chinese motifs and Li Po's poetry.

*Baraka* (1992), a film directed by Ron Fricke. This documentary film set to music highlights various scenic places around the globe.

2. Research the philosophical ideas related to Taoism. Find examples of Taoism in Li Po's descriptions of nature. What is the poet's relationship to the physical world?
3. Do you think it seems odd that Li Po celebrated wine so much? What would we think of that subject matter today?
4. Compare Li Po to his contemporary Tu Fu. Why might the former be better known than the latter?

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## ■ Elena Poniatowska

BORN: 1932, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French, Mexican

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Lilus Kikus* (1954)

*Until We Meet Again* (1969)

*Massacre in Mexico* (1975)

*The Night Visitor* (1979)

*Tinisima* (1992)

### Overview

Elena Poniatowska has devoted much of her fiction and journalism to giving a voice to the anonymous masses that do not have access to the printed word or to other modes of communication. Poniatowska includes women in the category of those without a voice, because the female experience has been traditionally ignored or silenced, especially in societies such as Mexico's, which are overwhelmingly patriarchal. A compassionate humor and subtle irony characterize Poniatowska's style, as does a great adeptness in the use of colloquial language. Early

on in her writing career Poniatowska became known primarily as a journalist and interviewer, and she has continued her work as a journalist while developing her fiction. Because of this, and because some of her fictional characters have been inspired by real people, her narratives are usually associated with the genre of the testimonial or the documentary novel.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Mix of Cultures** Elena Poniatowska was born in Paris on May 19, 1932. Her mother, the former Paula Amor Iturbide, was Mexican, though also born in France; her father, Yvan E. Poniatowski, was of Polish origin. As a result of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 her family on her mother's side lost part of its landholdings and fortune. Upon the outbreak of World War II she and her mother and sister moved to the south of France, where they lived with Yvan Poniatowski's parents. There Elena and her younger sister attended public school. When Elena was eight years old, they moved to Mexico to live with her mother's family, while her father remained in France fighting the Nazis. As a child she spoke French; only after moving to Mexico did she learn Spanish. In Mexico City she began her studies at a British high school, then attended the Liceo Francés de México for a year, and finished her last two years of secondary school at the Convent of the Sacred Heart's Eden Hall, in Torresdale, Pennsylvania.

After studying at Manhattanville College on a scholarship, Poniatowska began her literary career in 1953 in Mexico City, interviewing important Mexican literary and political personalities. She has worked as a journalist for more than thirty-five years, writing first for *Excelsior* in 1954 and, since 1955, for *Novedades*. She recounts that in her years as a reporter she did an interview a day, and that, when she went to work for *Novedades*, she was supposed to produce three articles every week. She has referred in interviews to the difficulties of combining the responsibilities of a mother, a wife, and a professional. She is still a regular contributor to such reviews as *Vuelta* and *Plural*, and is a member of the editorial board of *fem.*, a feminist journal directed by university women.

**Delving into Fiction** While pursuing a career in journalism, Poniatowska also delved into fiction. Her earliest fictional work, *Lilus Kikus* (1954), is a collection of short stories on the theme of childhood. The main character throughout the collection is a young girl, Lilus Kikus, bothered by feelings of estrangement from her peers because of her aristocratic European background—much like the author's own. The stories are at least in part autobiographical, in particular in their rendition of a young girl's conception of Catholicism. In the late 1960s Poniatowska began to experiment with more unconventional and inventive literary forms, melding



Elena Poniatowska. *Poniatowska, Elena, photograph.* © Jerry Bauer.  
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fictional and documentary modes and using methods of investigation derived from her work as a journalist, in particular the interviews. Her first work in this form, *Until We Meet Again* (1969), was a critical success. It defies traditional classifications and has been called an autobiographical novel or a fictionalized biography. Its subject matter is also considered revolutionary because it portrays a wholly unconventional, defiant, yet believable woman. *Until We Meet Again* is based on a real person, Jesusa Palancares, and her struggles through an impoverished life filled with both hardship and adventure. The most remarkable characteristic brought forth by Poniatowska's fictionalized autobiography is the physical and emotional strength of this peasant woman and her complete independence—traits that defy traditional notions of Latin American womanhood. Poniatowska based her book on extended interviews with her subject, modifying certain characters, language, and events to produce a story that fictionalizes the documentary report in certain respects. Her work as a journalist clearly informed her methodology in this novel.

**Success as a Journalist** During the 1960s and 1970s Poniatowska continued to develop as a journalist. *Crossword Puzzle* (1961) is a collection of her interviews, including conversations with Luis Buñuel, Lázaro Cárdenas, and Fidel Castro, while *It All Began on Sunday* (1963) documents what poor people do on Sundays and was illustrated by Alberto Beltrán. Her journalistic pieces are important documents of oral history; they recount the people's history of Mexico. Among them *Massacre in Mexico* (1971) stands out, as does *Silence So Strong* (1980) and *Nothing, Nobody* (1988), which contains testimonies about the earthquake in Mexico City in 1985.

One of the turning points of her career, *Massacre in Mexico* documents through a multitude of voices the massacre that occurred on October 2, 1968, when the Mexican police and soldiers fired on a peaceful protest crowd in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas after months of conflict between university students and the authorities. Poniatowska's chronicle brings together testimony from many witnesses of different political orientations, including parents and students; statements that appeared in the newspapers; headlines and news items; documents of student organizations; transcripts of tape recordings; army dispatches; and Poniatowska's own comments. In 1970 Poniatowska was awarded Mexico's most prestigious literary award, the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize, for *Massacre in Mexico*, but she refused to accept it. She accompanied her rejection with an open letter to the new president, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, who had been minister of the interior and responsible for security forces during the 1968 events. The sincerity of Poniatowska's political and humanitarian sympathies, as commentators have noted, are manifest in this letter, in which she refuses to allow the incident of the student massacre to

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Poniatowska's famous contemporaries include:

**Diego Rivera** (1886–1957): A famous Mexican muralist whom Poniatowska fictionalizes in *Dear Diego*.

**Octavio Paz** (1914–1998): Mexican poet and activist whose family was exiled for their support of the rebel Emiliano Zapata.

**Luis Echeverría Álvarez** (1922–): Mexican president from 1970 to 1976 who honored the victims of the Tlatelolco massacre but also incurred a great deal of national debt.

**Jimmy Carter** (1924–): United States president from 1977 to 1981 and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

**François Truffaut** (1932–1984): French New Wave filmmaker famous for such movies as *The 400 Blows* (1959).

**Laura Esquivel** (1950–): Mexican novelist most famous for her book full of love and recipes, *Like Water for Chocolate*.

achieve a kind of closure by the bestowing of an award on her book.

**Continuing Interest in Politics** Poniatowska continued to write fiction and newspaper and magazine articles throughout the 1990s and early part of the twenty-first century. In 2005, she became an outspoken supporter of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the losing candidate in the highly controversial Mexican presidential election of 2006.

## Works in Literary Context

**Blending Fiction and Nonfiction** A brief look at some of Poniatowska's work reveals the originality with which she creates new literary genres. *Dear Diego* (1978) is a novel in which the real-life affair between the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and his Russian mistress, the painter Angelina Beloff, is told through a sequence of heartfelt letters from Beloff to Rivera after he has left her in Paris. Poniatowska uses Beloff's predicament as an implied critique of the social situation of women both within the family structure and in the socially unrecognized position of mistress. In *The Night Visitor* (1979), a collection of Poniatowska's short stories, she uses a variety of modes of communication to convey the experiences of women from many social backgrounds, returning to issues treated in *Until We Meet Again*.

Poniatowska has stated that she sees herself first as a journalist, and a persistent theme when discussing her work has been the ways in which her journalistic outlook

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Poniatowska gives words to those whom she feels have no voice, whether they be females or the poor or the elderly. Here are a few other works that attempt to give voices to marginalized and traditionally "silent" peoples or characters.

*The Screwtape Letters* (1942), a fictional work by C. S. Lewis. A fictionalized series of sensitive and affectionate letters written by a demon in hell to his young apprenticeship nephew.

*The Tin Drum* (1959), a novel by Günter Grass. Due to his twisted childhood spent in Nazi-occupied Poland, Oskar, the protagonist of Grass's famous novel, must tell his story with the help of his favorite toy: his drum.

*Grendel* (1971), a novel by John Gardner. The *Beowulf* tale turned on its ear and retold—sympathetically—from the monster Grendel's point of view.

*Beloved* (1987), a novel by Toni Morrison. This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, structured much like a traditional slave narrative and based in part on a real person, tells the story of an escaped slave whose past returns to haunt her, literally.

and methods have shaped her more personal and fictionalized writings. She is especially highly regarded in Mexico as an interviewer, and commentators have observed that she has given the interview a new dimension by turning it into a literary genre.

**Speaking for the Voiceless** Poniatowska's avowed objective is to give a voice to those in modern Mexico whom she perceives as having no voice—the poor, the socially oppressed, the politically persecuted, students, women (particularly those of the most impoverished classes), and all others who have been marginalized. This is shown in *Until We Meet Again*, in which the main character Jesusa suffers the double stigma of being both poor and a woman. Poniatowska's 1979 book *Gaby Brimmer* tells the story of a real-life contemporary who suffered from cerebral palsy and faced physical and social barriers at every turn in her life.

### Works in Critical Context

It has been observed that humor and irony are frequently used by women writers as subtle means to subvert traditional, patriarchal values. Although Hispanic literature is not especially noted for its humor (indeed the reverse is the case), women writers often make use of this strategy in order to offer a critical perspective on the dominant order. Beneath an appearance of naïveté that would seem to exalt certain traditional feminine characteristics, such as the eagerness to serve others while ignoring one's own

needs, Poniatowska allows the reader to laugh and celebrate an event that undermines the basis of society, mocking not only the ridiculousness of the double standard in relationships between the sexes, but also the Mexican Revolution, religion, and the law.

**Massacre in Mexico** Poniatowska writes almost exclusively in Spanish—to date only a few of her books have been translated into English. *La noche de Tlatelolco: Testimonios de historia oral*, later translated as *Massacre in Mexico*, recounts Poniatowska's experiences in Mexico City during the 1968 student riots. J. A. Ellis explains in the *Library Journal* that the work is "the story of the continuing tragedy of Mexico.... The mood ranges from the early heady optimism of the students... to shock and despair." In a *Commonweal* review, Ronald Christ states that *Massacre in Mexico* is a "shatteringly beautiful book.... Recording everything she could about the incident and the events that led up to it, Poniatowska has assembled what she calls a 'collage of voices,' a brilliantly edited text whose texture is the weaving of anecdote, official history, gossip, placards, graffiti, journalism, eye-witness accounts, agonized interpretation."

**Tinisima** After ten years of research, Poniatowska published *Tinisima* in Spanish in 1994. In novel form, it tells the tale of Tina Modetti, an Italian artist and photographer who emigrated from Italy to San Francisco when she was seventeen. She later moved to Mexico and became the photographer Edward Weston's lover. She also had liaisons with Diego Rivera and other Mexican cultural and political contemporaries and became a Communist militant. Cristina Ferreira-Pinto, in *World Literature Today*, writes: "*Tinisima* is a novel that certainly involves the reader. It stimulates much reflection, and the issues it addresses, through its portrayal of a woman, a country, and a time, are disturbingly contemporary."

### Responses to Literature

1. Explain, with examples, how Poniatowska's writing style gives voice to the poor and oppressed.
2. Contrast the protagonist of *Dear Diego* with Laura Esquivel's in *Like Water for Chocolate*. Which female character is the more independent? How and why is this character so independent?
3. Whom does Poniatowska seem to blame for the events in *Massacre in Mexico*? Does she imply that it is solely the government's fault?
4. Poniatowska often fictionalizes real-life artists; what does she gain from taking people out of real life and recasting them as characters?
5. If Poniatowska were an American writer, what events or people do you think she would find interesting enough to write about and fictionalize? Why?

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## Alexander Pope

BORN: 1688, London, England

DIED: 1744, London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry, criticism

MAJOR WORKS:

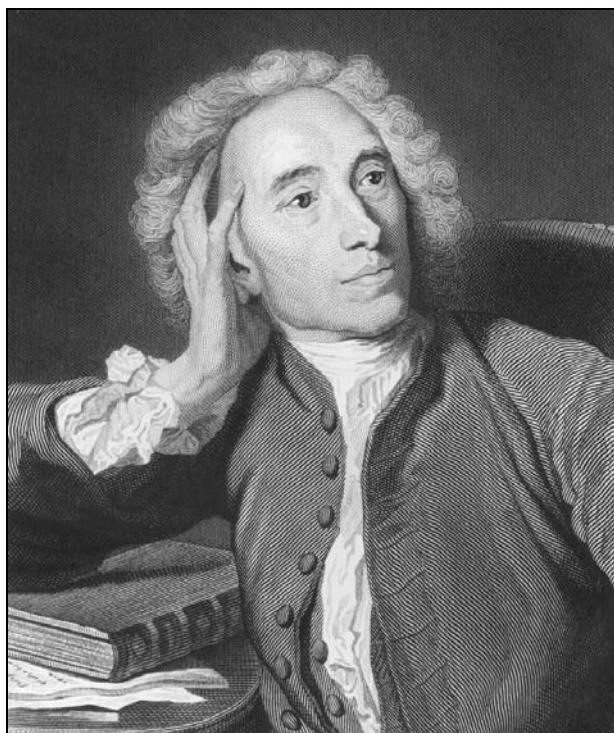
*An Essay on Criticism* (1711)

*The Rape of the Lock* (1714)

*The Dunciad* (1728)

*Moral Essays* (1731–1735; collected 1751)

*An Essay on Man* (1733)



Alexander Pope Hulton Archive / Getty Images

## Overview

Alexander Pope was a superstar of English neoclassical literature, so much so that the first half of the British eighteenth century is often referred to as "the age of Pope." Pope alternately defined, invented, satirized, critiqued, and reformed almost all of the genres and conventions of early-eighteenth-century British verse. He polished his work with meticulous care, and he is generally recognized as the greatest English poet between John Milton and William Wordsworth.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Catholic Exile** Pope's Roman Catholic father was a linen merchant. After a line of Catholic monarchs was excluded from England in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Catholics were barred from living within the city of London, and Pope's family moved to Binfield in Windsor Forest. Pope had little formal schooling, largely educating himself through extensive reading. He contracted a tubercular infection in his later childhood; tuberculosis is a highly contagious disease that generally causes damage to the lungs but can also affect other areas, such as the spine, as it did in Pope's case. Tuberculosis was a widespread concern in Pope's time, since effective treatments for the disease were still two centuries away, and half of those who developed full-blown symptoms would eventually die. Pope lived, but because of his illness, he

never grew taller than four feet six inches, suffering from curvature of the spine and constant headaches. His physical appearance, frequently mocked by his enemies, undoubtedly gave an edge to Pope's satire, but he was always generous in his affection for his parents and many friends.

**Early Poems** Pope was a child prodigy. His first publication, *Pastorals* (1709), drew on long-established literary conventions but nevertheless announced him as a major new talent. Pope's next major work, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), was much bolder. In the work, Pope finds modern literature largely failing in its responsibility to follow unchanging "nature," the test of which is how well we can recognize basic human truths in ancient classical works (particularly Homer). *An Essay on Criticism* became the manifesto for a major movement in literary criticism: neoclassicism. Pope wrote the entire essay in heroic couplets (pairs of rhymed iambic pentameter lines).

One year later, Pope surprised many by showing he was also a master of humor and satire with *The Rape of the Lock* (1712, two cantos), which immediately made Pope famous. A fashionable young lady, Arabella Fermor, had a lock of her hair cut off without permission by a suitor, and Pope was asked by a mutual friend to soothe ruffled tempers with a jest. Adopting a mock-heroic style that drew upon Homer and others (who were valorized so seriously in *An Essay on Criticism*), Pope showed how ridiculous it was to treat the event overseriously and simultaneously satirized the vanity and glitter of upper-class society.

Other poems published by 1717, the date of the first collected edition of Pope's works, include "Windsor Forest" (1713), which showed Pope as an "occasional" poet, or one who writes about current events. The collection also included *Eloisa to Abelard*, which shows Pope's turning to a new genre, love poetry.

**Translations of Homer** Pope's study of, and high regard for, classical literature led him naturally to the art of translation. He had already done poetic imitations, transformations, or translations of Vergil, the Bible, and Chaucer, but his versions of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were his greatest achievement as a translator and, some say, a poet. Pope not only translated Homer's Greek into English, but also recast the lines into powerful, expressive, and flexible heroic couplets.

Pope's translations sold well, making him one of England's first full-time, self-supporting poets. Unlike Edmund Spenser (1552–1599), who was arguably England's first professional writer, Pope was the first poet to become wealthy. In 1716, an increased land tax on Roman Catholics forced the Popes to sell their place at Binfield, but after Pope's father died in 1717, Pope and his mother moved to an expansive villa outside London. He had gardens built there that became famous through-

out Europe, complete with an underground grotto decorated with shells and bright stones.

During these years, Pope became friends with some brilliant writers, including Jonathan Swift, Dr. John Arbuthnot, John Gay, and Thomas Parnell. Together they combined to form the Scriblerus Club, and they planned a series of satires against narrow-minded academics and the popular culture's fascination with "novelty." Together they published *The Memoires of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741), and their discussions contributed to the creation of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Pope's *The Dunciad*.

**The Dunciad** One of the editorial projects Pope undertook was an edition of Shakespeare's plays (1725). Pope's explanatory notes were uneven, and the edition was attacked by a rival Shakespeare editor, Lewis Theobald. Pope, never one to forget or forgive criticism, made Theobald the head of all dunces in a mock-epic tour de force of bitterly satirical couplets. *The Dunciad* (the title is a pun on Homer's epic *The Iliad*) appeared in 1728. A year later the text increased to include a large collection of notes and commentaries intended as a burlesque on the heavy labor of commentators and textual critics. Pope used *The Dunciad* to settle old scores and to show his distaste for a literary culture that would come to be known as "Grub Street"; on "Grub Street," writers competed with one another to appeal to the lowest tastes of the reading public, which often resulted in untalented and irresponsible writers gaining undeserved literary prominence.

**The Epistles and An Essay on Man** Late in his life, Pope undertook a series of satires in the classical sense of the term, a collection of serious and sardonic commentaries of culture and ethics. These satires took the form of letters (or "epistles") to his close friends. For example, "The Epistle to Burlington" (1731) illustrates, along with its companion piece "Epistle to Bathurst" (1733), the right and wrong way to use wealth as well as the parallels between artistic taste and moral virtue.

*An Essay on Man* is Pope's most philosophical work and in some ways his most ambitious. Pope's argument views religion through the lens of the emerging eighteenth-century Enlightenment: seeing God as a rational and balanced creator who, by nature, ensures that everything happens as part of a carefully organized universal plan. "All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee; / All chance, direction, which thou canst not see / All discord, harmony not understood, / All partial evil, universal good," Pope writes. Pope also revives the ancient idea of the "great chain of being," the idea that all species in creation are ranked in a hierarchy with God and the angels at the top, Man in the middle, and the simple organism at the bottom. Presuming for ourselves the authority to blame God for when things do not go our way, Pope says, is therefore an absurd and blasphemous act of pride for stepping out of our place on the chain. In essence, *An Essay on Man* is not so much

philosophy or theology, but a poet's apprehension of unity despite diversity, of an order embracing the whole multifarious creation—a theme that finds expression in Pope's works as various as the *Pastorals*, *The Dunciad*, and "An Epistle to Burlington."

## Works in Literary Context

**Pope and Neoclassicism** Pope, particularly in *An Essay on Criticism* and "Epistle to Arbuthnot," contributed to neoclassicism, or the resurgence in ancient ideals in art and literature—particularly the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. For Pope, the core truth is whatever has lasted longest across many generations of readers; thus we should look to ancient literature for truth. In the epics of Homer, for example, the ethics of heroism, loyalty, and leadership are as true now as they were then. In addition, the balanced and symmetrical structures of classical literature and architecture represent values of reason and coherence that Pope says should remain central to all modern arts.

**Comic Satire** Pope used his great knowledge of and respect for classical literature to write mock-epics that poked fun at the elite. Essentially Pope believed the upper class possessed an exaggerated sense of its own importance. He also made fun of hack writers, comparing their shoddy work with timeless stories of the past. Pope is credited for proclaiming, "Praise undeserved is satire in disguise."

**Pope and Proverbs** Pope's style and personal philosophies have become part of the English language. For example, "A little learning is a dang'rous thing" comes from *An Essay on Criticism*, as does "To err is human, to forgive, divine." Other well-known sayings from *An Essay on Criticism* include "For fools rush in where angels fear to tread" and "Hope springs eternal."

## Works in Critical Context

Pope's enormous success attracted a great deal of jealousy within the already competitive and vindictive London literary scene. Pope's Catholicism, his conservative politics, and his unusual physical appearance made the literary public even more envious. Pope remembered every literary critic who dared to disapprove of his work or mock his physical appearance, and decades after someone printed a bad review of Pope's poetry, a critic might find their name in the parade of fools in *The Dunciad*. Not satisfied with the level of attack in that work, which was enough to ruin the career of more than one writer, Pope followed it a year later with *The Dunciad, Variorum*, which added mock-scholarly footnotes naming names of even more of the disfavored literary critics and hack writers who, Pope believed, were dragging down the dignity of the entire literary profession and endangering the moral foundation of society.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pope's famous contemporaries include:

**Christian Wolff** (1679–1754): A philosopher who embodied the Enlightenment ideal in Germany, Wolff is regarded as the inventor of economics and public administration as fields of academic study, and his ideas influenced the American Declaration of Independence.

**George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759): A German-born composer who later relocated to England, Handel is most famous for his oratorio *The Messiah*, composed in 1741.

**George Berkeley** (1685–1753): Berkeley, an Irish philosopher who promoted the idea of "immaterialism," also contributed to the development of calculus.

**John Harrison** (1693–1776): This English clockmaker who invented the marine chronometer, a device that accurately determined the longitudinal position of a ship, won a huge prize offered by the British Parliament and made voyages to the New World safer and more efficient.

**Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu** (1689–1755): This French social and political commentator promoted the separation of government powers, an idea that became a cornerstone of the American Constitution.

## Pope in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

After his death in 1744, few had anything but the highest praise for Pope's poetic achievement. Joseph Warton and Samuel Johnson, perhaps the most influential critical voices in the late eighteenth century, secured his place in the literary canon. For the Romantic critics of the early nineteenth century, however, Pope was often seen more as a fine poetic craftsman who nevertheless preferred topical satire and petty themes to the higher (to Romantics, anyway) poetic subjects of the natural world and confessional passions. As the mid-nineteenth-century Victorians sought to distinguish themselves with a high moral tone in contrast to their somewhat more coarse and outspoken eighteenth-century ancestors, Pope was respected but largely neglected.

**New Critics** The New Critics of the mid-twentieth century revived interest in Pope with their emphasis on high literary technique, irony, and the poetic rewards of close reading. A definitive edition of Pope's works in 1963 and a thorough biography by Maynard Mack in 1985 brought about many new enthusiastic and often biographically based interpretations of Pope's work. In recent years, Pope's collected poetry has proven a rich resource for cultural critics interested in

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

When tragedy strikes, people of faith often question how a just and good God could allow it to happen. Pope, who had crippling physical ailments and chronic pain for his entire adult life, worked out his own theories in *An Essay on Man*. Many other authors have tackled these difficult questions with alternate answers.

*In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (2005). Selected teachings of the Buddha from the Pali Canon, the earliest record of what the Buddha taught, from truths on family life and marriage to renunciation and the path of insight.

*The Metamorphosis* (1915), a novella by Franz Kafka. In this classic existentialist work, a man wakes up one day and finds he has been transformed into a human-sized dung beetle. No explanation is given, no lessons are learned, and no redemption is given.

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1983), a nonfiction book by Harold S. Kushner. In this controversial best seller written by a Jewish rabbi facing the death of his own child, Kushner offered a theory that God does not necessarily control everything that happens in his creation.

all aspects of early eighteenth-century values and culture, particularly the influence of colonial ideologies, the role of gender in the poet's imagination, the impact of an emerging print culture, the new emphasis on materialism, and the complex interactions of religion and politics as the Restoration moved into the early eighteenth century.

### Responses to Literature

1. Pope did not often appreciate it when other people wrote about him, but he wrote often about himself. Particularly in the "Epistle to Arbuthnot," how does Pope portray himself? What is Pope's image of himself and the conditions of his own life? Jot down a paragraph summarizing your findings.
2. For all of the satire in *The Rape of the Lock*, it is often said that a tone of admiration and even longing resonates in the way Pope portrays the kind of upper-class society from which he was excluded as a Catholic, a poet, and the son of a linen merchant. With a classmate, discuss whether you agree or disagree. Then, discuss whether you think Pope manages to balance or combine his admiration of Belinda and her friends with his satire of them.

Point out specific lines from the text to support your ideas.

3. Do some research into the style of gardens in the eighteenth century. Create an audiovisual report discussing why you think landscaping means more than just a pleasing arrangement of plants. Then, research the way Pope made contributions to the theories of gardening during his lifetime, as well as the plants or forms he incorporated into his own garden. Add your findings about Pope to your presentation.

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### ■ Jean-Baptiste Poquelin

SEE *Moliere*

## Terry Pratchett

BORN: 1948, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, England

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Colour of Magic* (1983)

*Interesting Times* (1994)

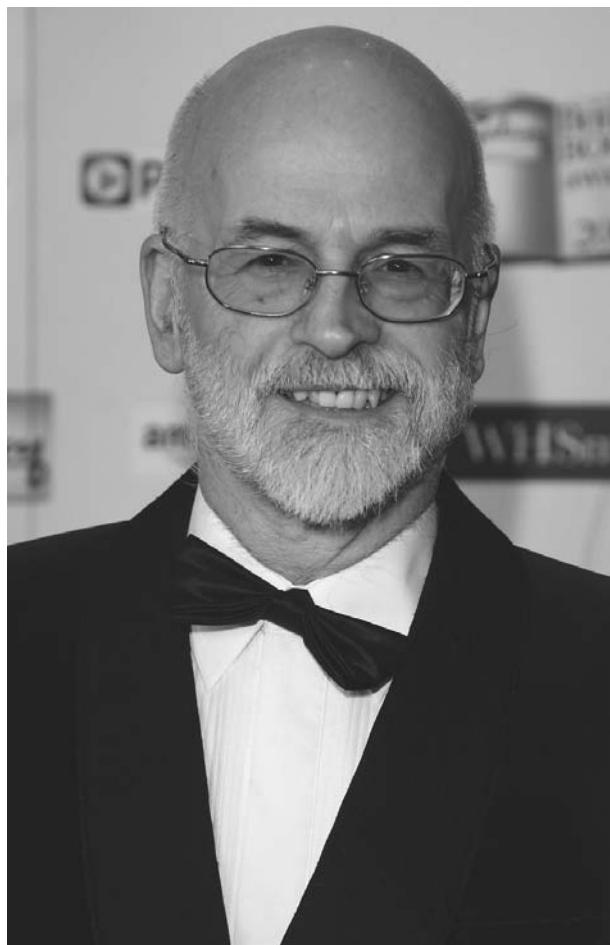
*The Johnny Maxwell Trilogy* (1999)

*The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* (2001)

*The Bromeliad Trilogy* (2003)

### Overview

Terry Pratchett, the author of the increasingly popular Discworld series, is widely known for writing tales of witches, wizards, and sons of Satan—all with a sly sense of humor. Called the “master of humorous fantasy” by a critic for *Publishers Weekly*, Pratchett is also regarded as a



Terry Pratchett Gareth Cattermole / Getty Images

serious craftsman but with an unusual cult following: the second-most-read author in England and the seventh-most-read non-American author in the United States.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Prodigious Beginning** Terry Pratchett was born on April 28, 1948, in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, England, to David and Eileen Pratchett. He had no siblings. At eleven years of age, he passed his eleven-plus exam and entered High Wycombe Technical High School. Getting what he has said is most of his education from the Beaconsfield Public Library, Pratchett read constantly, turning often to the works of H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, and “every book you really ought to read,” he later reported.

**Early Interests in Astronomy** Pratchett developed an early penchant for space and astronomy. Included in his boyhood collection were Brooke Bond tea cards and a telescope, which he hoped would be a part of a long career in astronomy. However, having weak skills in math, the young Pratchett turned back to reading and, in particular, to science fiction books, including his favorite, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), by Kenneth Graeme. He also began to write; at thirteen he published his first short story, “The Hades Business,” in the school paper. The story was then published by a local magazine, bringing Pratchett his first income. This, according to his official Web site, enabled the young prodigy to purchase his first writing equipment, a secondhand typewriter.

**Early Writing Success** Pratchett began studying English, art, and history in school, and eventually decided to become a journalist. By age seventeen, Pratchett left school to begin work with Bucks Free Press and wrote his first novel, a humorous children’s fantasy titled *The Carpet People*. The book was published in 1971.

**The Discworld Series** With the success of his first novel, Pratchett continued to write and publish, delivering to his soon-to-be-fanatic readers *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976) and *Strata* (1981). Two years later, his creative efforts launched him into literary stardom: beginning the same year, he became press officer for the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) covering three nuclear power plants and published *The Colour of Magic* (1983). The novel was the first of his “Discworld” works, novels of science fiction and fantasy set in a flat world. The planet is supported on the backs of four gigantic elephants astride the shell of an immense tortoise swimming in space.

Pratchett continued with the comedic and fantastic Discworld series, which features witches and wizards and gnomes and trolls, presenting them to an eager readership. *The Light Fantastic* (1986), *Equal Rites* (1987), and *Mort* (1987) were the first sequels. As the Discworld series grew rapidly in production and popularity, numerous offshoots entertained Pratchett’s avid followers—including Discworld

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pratchett's famous contemporaries include:

**Vladimir Bukovsky** (1942–): Russian author and activist, he is most noted for being a former Soviet political dissident.

**Hillary Rodham Clinton** (1947–): First Lady to the forty-second president of the United States and junior U.S. senator from New York, in 2007 she became the first woman to be a serious contender for the nomination by a major political party for U.S. president.

**Ken Follett** (1949–): British author of historical and thriller fiction, he has sold more than one hundred million copies of his books.

**Robert Haas** (1941–): American poet who has served two terms as U.S. poet laureate (from 1995 to 1997) and has contributed greatly to contemporary literature.

**Stephen Hawking** (1942–): British theoretical physicist who is known for his important work on relativity, black hole, and radiation theory.

**J. K. Rowling** (1965–): British author famous for her Harry Potter books and the best-selling author in history.

reference books, guides, and maps; short stories; animations and theater productions; and television programs.

**Continued Accolades and Awards** With the publication and astonishing success of his fourth Discworld volume, *Mort*, Pratchett decided to turn to writing full-time. In addition to writing thirty-six Discworld books, Pratchett started to write graphic novels and comic books for Discworld. Game designers and platforms delivered numerous versions of Discworld role-playing games. By 1989 Pratchett and his Discworld series had been honored with the British Science Fiction Award, a first of several awards the comic author was to receive.

In the early 1990s, Pratchett also delivered another award-winning series featuring Johnny Maxwell. After a trio of successful works dubbed the Bromeliad Trilogy, Pratchett began the Johnny Maxwell trilogy with *Only You Can Save Mankind* (1992), followed by *Johnny and the Dead* (1993) and *Johnny and the Bomb* (1996). All were exceptionally well-received. The second volume won Pratchett the 1993 Best Children's Book award from the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. By 1996 he was reportedly the top-selling and highest-earning author in the United Kingdom; by 2003, he was second only to the author of the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling.

**Ongoing Productivity and Popularity** Pratchett met and married Lyn Purves at the start of his writing career. Together they raised daughter Rhianna, who was born in 1976. The Pratchett family moved southwest of

Salisbury, Wiltshire, in 1993 and still reside there. In 2007 Pratchett was diagnosed with a rare form of Alzheimer's disease called posterior cortical atrophy. As the disease began to impact his physical efforts at writing, Pratchett has become an active fundraiser, making charitable contributions himself, including the sum of one million U.S. dollars to the Alzheimer's Research Trust. His donation reportedly prompted a mimicking movement online, whereby Pratchett fans began a campaign they call "Match it for Pratchett," in hopes of raising another million for Alzheimer's research.

In 1998 Pratchett was named an Officer of the British Empire "for services to literature." In 2002 he received the esteemed Carnegie Medal from the British Library Association for one of his many popular children's books, *The Amazing Maurice and his Educated Rodents* (2001). Pratchett's work has been translated into thirty-three languages and has sold more than forty-five million copies.

### Works in Literary Context

**Classical and Popular Characters** Several influences are built into Pratchett's works. As he told James Naughtie at the BBC Radio show *Bookclub*, he leans on characters from ancient history, classic literature, and popular culture, and adds his own brand of humor. Indeed, it is the original sources that provide inspiration for and give impetus to his humorous style.

**Satire and Parody** The outside influences that inform Pratchett's humorous work became more than inspiration for his humorous style. Satire is apparent in his fantasy and science fiction. Naughtie notes that Pratchett's Discworld series began as a parody of the fantasy genre, but over the course of development, it turned into "a satire on just about everything."

As a critic for *Authors and Artists for Young Adults* adds, "Discworld—as well as most of Pratchett's other works—also offers humorous parodies of other famous science fiction and fantasy writers, such as J. R. R. Tolkien or Larry Niven." Pratchett also spoofs (or parodies) contemporary concerns. For instance, he spoofs death in *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Predictions of Agnes Nutter, Witch* (1990, cowritten by Neil Gaiman). This novel is like several in this genre, a send-up of modern horror themes—particularly *The Omen* series of films and the series' imitators. When the son of Satan is misplaced and raised as a nice child, the schedule of Armageddon is thrown awry, and the powers of heaven and hell must pitch together to work things out.

### Works in Critical Context

Pratchett has earned an esteemed reputation with both the public and the critics—most notably for his Discworld series.

**Discworld Books (1983–2007)** Critical reception for the thirty-plus volumes in the series has been almost unanimously favorable. Critic David V. Barrett made a general

comment in a *New Statesman & Society* review, saying that the novels of Discworld “are works of marvelous composition and rattling good stories.” Making more specific comments, a *Publishers Weekly* critic in a review of the Discworld novel *Interesting Times* (1994) wrote, “Pratchett is an acquired taste, but the acquisition seems easy, judging from the robust popularity of Discworld.” Of *Lords and Ladies* (1992), a dark-side study of elves, *Library Journal*'s Jackie Cassada concluded that the volume shows why Pratchett “may be one of the genre's . . . most inventive humorists.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Pratchett has become one of the rare contemporary novelists who has a cult following. This is evident in the substance and numbers of message boards where fans discuss his works at great length. Visit the message boards at [TerryPratchettBooks.com](http://TerryPratchettBooks.com). Read several postings from at least three forums. Then, given the contents of the threads, make an effort to characterize the Pratchett Fanatic, or cult follower. Use critical thinking skills to determine who the “typical” reader is, identifying gender, geographic location, and age.
2. On the Web site *Books at Transworld* ([www.booksattransworld.co.uk/](http://www.booksattransworld.co.uk/)) is a quiz titled, “Can You Survive the Discworld Quiz?” Before going to the quiz, work with a partner to come up with your own Discworld trivia quiz. When you finish, go to Transworld (or Trivia Net) and take one quiz. What do your two trivia quizzes have in common? How are they different?
3. Pratchett's books, especially the Discworld series, have generated a phenomenal collection of cartoons, shows, comic books, guides, and games. As a group, decide on one Discworld book and prepare a small study guide for students. This might include a character guide, a list of important locations and the flora and fauna found there, information from previous Discworld books relevant to the current story, and themes found within the work. To aid in the project, research the many well-developed sites dedicated to games, themes, and other elements of the Discworld series.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Few subjects escape Pratchett's satire, which mocks the publishing and filmmaking industries, histories, cultures, music genres, philosophies, politics, and religions, among others. Here are a few works by writers who also have fun with satirizing universal concerns or parodying more serious works:

*Animal Farm* (1945), a novella by George Orwell. In this satirical allegory, the farm animals are stand-ins for Bolshevik revolutionaries who plot to take over the human-run farmstead.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a play by Oscar Wilde. This satirical comedy of errors heavily mocks the etiquette of high society.

*Main Street* (1920), a novel by Sinclair Lewis. In this satirical work, the author makes commentary on contemporary American values.

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), a play by Tom Stoppard. This play is a modern parody of several elements in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599–1601).

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## Marcel Proust

BORN: 1871, Auteuil, France

DIED: 1922, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–1927)



Marcel Proust *Proust, Marcel, photograph.* AP Images.

## Overview

Marcel Proust is known primarily for his multivolume novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, regarded as one of the most important works of twentieth-century literature. A philosophical meditation on the nature of time and consciousness, Proust's masterpiece offers profound psychological insights into the complicated human soul. In addition, the novel provides a social chronicle of turn-of-the-century Parisian society.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Family and Early Life** Marcel Proust was born July 10, 1871, in Auteuil, France, to Adrien, a prominent medical doctor, and Jeanne Weil Proust. His mother was Jewish and later converted to Christianity. Proust attended L'École libre des sciences politiques, graduating in 1890, and the Sorbonne, University of Paris, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1895. Although he suffered severely from asthma, he completed a year of military service in 1889–1890.

Proust was homosexual at a time when it was not spoken of openly, and he sought to hide this part of himself from public view. Before World War I, he was emotionally involved with Alfred Agostinelli, who was

killed in an airplane crash in 1914. The extent of his relationships with other men is unknown.

**Early Work** In the mid-1890s, Proust was chiefly known as a contributor of short prose to various Paris reviews. In an important work of criticism published posthumously, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve* (1954), Proust presented his conception of literature. Charles Saint-Beuve was a major critic who viewed literature as an expression of the author's life experiences. On the contrary, Proust argued that the author transcends the historical and biographical in the process of writing. He called on writers to create a new literature of impressions by which they convey their subjective selves. These impressions were to be based on involuntary memories, such as those springing from taste and sound.

In 1895 he was appointed to the library of the Institut de France. He seldom performed his duties, annually asked for leave on the pretext of bad health, and was finally dismissed in 1900. Proust's real interest during all of this time was society, which he would examine in his literary masterpiece.

On September 26, 1905, his mother died. While Proust had previously published one novel and abandoned work on another, one of the debts that he felt he owed his mother was to write a great work of literature.

**Remembrance of Things Past** Started in 1909, *Remembrance of Things Past* originally appeared in seven volumes, three of which were not published until after Proust's death. He never finished revising these final volumes. *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, was published in 1913. Like the other volumes in the series, it is a complete novel in itself. It introduces the many themes and motifs—such as memory, jealous love, social ambition, homosexuality, and the importance of art—that are developed in later volumes. It was greeted with hostility because of the complexity of Proust's style.

The second volume, *Within a Budding Grove*, was published in 1919. Volume three, *The Guermantes Way* (1920), won a national literary prize and brought Proust international recognition. *Cities of the Plain* (1922) explores the themes of homosexuality and corruption.

For most of his last fifteen years, Proust lived as an invalid. He died of a lung infection on November 18, 1922, in Paris.

Three more volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past* were published after his death. *The Captive* (1923) and *The Sweet Cheat Gone* (1925), the fifth and sixth volumes of the series, were not included in Proust's original plan for *Remembrance of Things Past*, and some critics believe that events in Proust's personal life led him to expand his novel to include the themes of jealous love and deception.

*Time Regained* (1927), the final volume, successfully ties together all of the novel's recurrent themes and motifs. In *Time Regained*, the narrator realizes that memory is the key to the meaning of the past that he has been

seeking and that art has the ability to redeem experience from disillusionment, deception, and the decay of time.

### Works in Literary Context

*Remembrance of Things Past* continues the traditions both of the great seventeenth-century classical writers such as Madame de La Fayette, the Duc de Saint-Simon, and the Duc de La Rochefoucauld, and of the nineteenth-century realists such as Stendhal, Honoré de Balzac, and Gustave Flaubert. At the same time, it is highly innovative in technique and content.

Marcel Proust was influenced by the British critic and writer John Ruskin who used complicated sentence structures to capture the impressions and experiences furnished by art and nature. Proust translated several of Ruskin's works, although he objected to the writer's moralizing on works of art.

In *Time Regained*, the final novel of *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator rejects realism and acknowledges his literary ancestors: founder of French Romanticism Chateaubriand, the Romantic French poet Gerard de Nerval, and the poet Charles Baudelaire, famous for his *Flowers of Evil*.

**The Importance of Memory** One of the most important elements throughout the entire series of novels is memory and its necessity in the creation of art. The translation of the series' title in French, *In Search of Lost Time*, reflects the author's close association of time and memory, with memories being the tangible legacy of past times and experiences. This is shown most dramatically when Marcel eats a madeleine, a sensory experience that draws him into a world of memory.

### Works in Critical Context

In 1936, Proust scholar Leon Pierre-Quint claimed that the fashion for *Remembrance of Things Past* had ended and that Marcel Proust was destined to interest only thesis writers at the Sorbonne. He could not have been more mistaken, for Proust today is almost universally revered as the greatest French author of the twentieth century.

Criticism from the 1970s and 1980s, in addition to a wealth of biographical and critical material from previous decades, attests to the multiple approaches one can take to Proust's work. While textual scholarship is still being pursued, the most recent critical examinations have tended to emphasize either narrative technique or psychological content.

**Proust as Narrative Innovator** Proust is seen as a great narrative innovator; his manipulations of narrative time and voice, for example, are an early instance of techniques later used by certain New Novelists, as Gérard Genette showed in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method*, and Proustian technique contributed to creating a new conception of story line and narrator. Other critics view Proust as one of the most creative psychologists of the self; Serge Doubrovsky, in *Writing and Fantasy in*

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Proust's famous contemporaries include:

**Colette** (1873–1954): A French writer who scandalized the public with her affairs with both men and women. Her novels included semiautobiographical elements.

**Anatole France** (1844–1924): French writer, considered a master of irony. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1921.

**Rosa Luxemburg** (1870–1919): Jewish German political revolutionary who cofounded what became Germany's Communist Party. She was revered by many Marxists and killed by German monarchist soldiers.

**Thomas Mann** (1875–1955): German novelist awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1929. He was well known for his novels *Buddenbrooks* and *The Magic Mountain*.

**Émile Zola** (1840–1902): French novelist who was influential in the school of naturalism, which sought to portray life realistically.

*Proust*, has shown how Proust used language and metaphor to conceal and reveal at once the most intimate obsessions of his psyche.

One of the most important issues in Proust criticism is the role of the character Marcel as protagonist and narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* and his relationship to Proust himself. There is strong evidence for both identifying Proust with Marcel and for separating the two, and some interpretations of the novel are more autobiographical than others. Perhaps the firmest ground for likening Proust with Marcel is their mutual struggle to realize themselves as artists, with each making art the highest value in their lives. For both, the search for lost time ends in the disillusioned abandonment of life and in the affirmative re-creation of life as a work of art.

### Responses to Literature

1. Charles Saint-Beuve argued that literature is "an expression of the author's life experiences." What does that mean? Write an essay analyzing the meaning of that statement and arguing for or against that point of view.
2. Think about memory as a key to the meaning of the past. Write two or three paragraphs about a significant event in your life. Then rewrite it from someone else's point of view. How does what you choose to reveal in each version influence the reader's perception of what happened?

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In Marcel Proust's masterpiece, memory becomes a means of transcending change and death; involuntary memory can transport individuals through time. He finds affirmation in the re-creation of life as a work of art. Here are some other works that deal with similar themes:

*House of Incest* (1936), a novella by Anaïs Nin. "Incest" here is a metaphor for loving only one's own qualities in another; this surrealistic novel investigates reality by delving into the subconscious.

*The Lost World* (1965), poetry by Randall Jarrell. This volume of poetry, published posthumously, was inspired by letters Jarrell wrote to his mother as a child and reshapes his childhood memories.

*Native Guard* (2007), poetry by Natasha Tretheway. These poems examine the author's heritage as a multiracial southerner; the ten sonnets of the title poem tell the story of a Civil War soldier in an all-black regiment and reveal the circularity of life.

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), a novel by James Joyce. This semiautobiographical novel follows the young Stephen Dedalus as he questions his religious upbringing and leaves his native Ireland to become an artist.

*The Waves* (1931), a novel by Virginia Woolf. This novel, following six friends through their lives, is freed from narrative time and explores change and metamorphosis.

3. In *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator famously eats a madeleine, a type of cookie, that transports him to his past. Listen to some music that was important to you several years ago. Write two or three paragraphs describing your memory of listening to it before. Be specific—what clothes were you wearing, where were you, who were you with?
4. Marcel Proust argued that people could re-create their lives as works of art. Using the Internet and your library's resources, research other artists who have attempted similar projects—such as Andy Warhol, the New York artist. Write an essay discussing how Warhol or another artist tried to make his or her own life into a work of art.

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## Alexander Pushkin

BORN: 1799, Moscow, Russia

DIED: 1837, St. Petersburg, Russia

NATIONALITY: Russian

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, drama, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1820)

*The Gypsies* (1827)

*Boris Godunoff* (1831)

*Eugene Onegin: A Romance of Russian Life in Verse* (1833)

*The Captain's Daughter; or, The Generosity of the Russian Usurper Pugatscheff* (1836)

#### Overview

Many extol Alexander Pushkin not only as Russia's greatest poet, but also as one of the most important writers in history to have influenced Russian culture and literature.



Alexander Pushkin Writer Pictures / drr.net

During a time when most literature was being written in English and French, Pushkin accentuated the simplicity and beauty of the Russian language, capturing the hearts of his compatriots. In addition, he served as Russia's historiographer under Tsar Nicholas I. While he was inspired by the structural and stylistic characteristics of European authors, such as Voltaire, Lord Byron, and Shakespeare, Pushkin recast them in a uniquely Russian mold. Unfortunately, because his writing has distinctive rhythmic patterns that are difficult to translate, foreign readers do not have the opportunity, as do native Russian speakers, to appreciate the true power and magnificence of his work.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Aristocratic Upbringing** Pushkin was born in Moscow on May 26, 1799, into an aristocratic family whose noble ancestry could be traced back over six hundred years. As a child, Pushkin was educated informally at home by his nurse, Arina. Arina told him the fairy tales and folk tales he would later incorporate into his writings.

Pushkin was formally educated by private tutors, who borrowed freely from the household's library—a collection that included many French works—for Pushkin's lessons. When he was twelve, Pushkin was sent to the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum near St. Petersburg, a prestigious institution designed to prepare young men of nobility for government posts. There, he read voraciously—especially French literature—and wrote prolifically. Pushkin's first published poem, "Recollections of Tsarskoe-Selo," (1815) was well received by several leading poets. After graduating, Pushkin was given a paid position in St. Petersburg that required little work.

**Exile** Alternating between periods of carefree socializing and concentrated writing in St. Petersburg, Pushkin finished his first full-length piece, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, in 1820. However, Pushkin was not in St. Petersburg long enough to experience the popular success of his poem, for his all-too-vocal expression of his political views had drawn the attention of officials. Alexander I exiled Pushkin to southern Russia shortly before publication of *Ruslan and Lyudmila*. For Pushkin, censorship remained a lifelong problem. During his four-year exile, he was productive, writing *The Captive of the Caucasus* (1822) and *The Bakchesarian Fountain: A Tale of the Tauride* (1824). These are romantic narrative poems that reflect the influence of Byron, whom Pushkin read during this period.

In the months before leaving Kishinev in 1823, Pushkin began work on his novel in verse and magnum opus, *Eugene Onegin*, which he would publish serially in chapters, beginning in 1825 and continuing over the next seven years (it was published in full in 1833). Pushkin was able to obtain a transfer in the summer of 1823 to Odessa, where he continued writing *Eugene Onegin*. In 1824, a letter was intercepted by authorities in which Pushkin expressed a fondness for atheism. Pushkin found himself exiled to his mother's family estate at Mikhailovskoe, where he stayed until 1826.

**Controlled Freedom** After the Decembrist Revolt, which took place in 1825, Pushkin petitioned for his return from exile. Tsar Nicholas I allowed Pushkin to return to Russia and to travel with some degree of (but not total) freedom; he appointed himself Pushkin's personal censor. During this new stage in Pushkin's life, he concentrated on writing drama, making efforts that proved to be groundbreaking in Russian theater despite being under strict observation. With the historical play *Boris Godunoff*, Pushkin hoped to end the influence of the French classical style that had dominated the Russian stage for so long. Although Pushkin completed the play in 1825, censors prevented it from being published until 1831, and it was not performed until 1870, more than thirty years after the author's death.

During the years after his exile, Pushkin began writing three of the four short dramas most often referred to

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Pushkin's famous contemporaries include:

- Louis Visconti** (1791–1853): This French architect built the tomb of Napoléon and also designed the New Louvre in Paris.
- Benjamin Waterhouse** (1754–1846): Waterhouse was the first doctor to test the smallpox vaccine in the United States.
- Esaias Tegnér** (1782–1846): Known as the greatest Swedish poet, Tegnér was also a scholar, bishop, and politician.
- Margaret Fuller** (1810–1850): In 1840, Fuller joined Ralph Waldo Emerson in founding the *Dial*, an American journal dedicated to promoting transcendentalism.
- Victor Hugo** (1802–1885): Hugo, a French author, wrote the masterpieces *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862).
- Hans Christian Andersen** (1805–1875): Andersen, a Danish author, is most famous for his fairy tales, including "The Little Mermaid" (1837) and "The Ugly Duckling" (1844).

as the "little" or "miniature" tragedies: *The Covetous Knight*, *Mozart and Salieri*, a play based on the supposed rivalry of composers Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Antonio Salieri; and *Stone Guest*. The fourth, *Feast During the Plague*, is a translation of an English play. It was during this time that Pushkin finally brought to completion his novel, *Eugene Onegin*.

**Scandal and Death** In February 1831, Pushkin married Nathalia Goncharova, and in May of 1832 she bore his first child, Maria. Nicholas was evidently pleased with Pushkin's marriage, apparent stability, and dedication to the state. He reinstated Pushkin in state service as a historiographer with a salary and access to state archives. However, as Pushkin's debts increased, and as more children came, he grew more dependent on favors from Nicholas. Pushkin's presence (and that of his wife) at society functions was made obligatory by his appointment as a minor court official, an inconsequential position that was intended to humiliate the writer. Soon, gossip about an affair between Nathalia and Baron Georges d'Anthés began to circulate and continued even after d'Anthés married Nathalia's sister. Attempting to put an end to the scandal, Pushkin met d'Anthés in a duel with pistols. D'Anthés was slightly wounded; Pushkin was mortally wounded and died two days later on January 29, 1837. Mourned as Russia's national poet, Pushkin was buried in St. Petersburg by Tsar Nicholas I.

## Works in Literary Context

**French Influence** Much of Pushkin's early work, including the verse narrative *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, was based on the folklore he had been exposed to as a child. For example, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, the poem that established his reputation, was based on "Orlando Furioso," a chivalric poem by Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto. Pushkin's style during his early career was influenced by the French writers Voltaire, André Chenier, and Evariste Parny. According to scholar Yuri Druzhnikov, even the characters' names in *Ruslan and Lyudmila* reflect Pushkin's admiration of Parny: "where Parny has Aïna, Pushkin has Naïna; where Parny has Rusla, Pushkin has Ruslan."

**Romantic Roots** During the time of his exile, Pushkin was greatly influenced by Romantic poet George Gordon, Lord Byron. *The Fountain of Bachtshisarai*, *The Robber-Brother*, *The Bohemians*, and other Pushkin poems all portray strong traces of an intimate acquaintance with Byron. They have a similar form; their heroes and heroines resemble those of Byron's poems; the gloomy coloring, the mysterious connection between guilt and fate are the same. Though Byron took his subjects from a foreign world, Pushkin took his subjects from places and a society with which he was thoroughly familiar. Consequently, he was able to give them a distinctly local tone and color.

**The Pushkin Sonnet** Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* shows that Byron's influence was only temporary. In addition to its pure, expressive language, which is the hallmark of Pushkin's style, the work features character types that appear frequently in later Russian fiction: the "superfluous man," represented by Onegin, and the idealized Russian woman, characterized by Tatiana.

*Eugene Onegin* was eight years in the making. The very form of the novel indicates Pushkin's early discomfort with conventional genres, his striving to make his own mark in an original way. First of all he called his work not simply a novel but (and he emphasized this) a "novel in verse" and termed its sections "chapters" rather than "cantos." While clearly seeking to be innovative, he also showed an awareness of European models.

This new Russian genre, the Onegin stanza, is also known as the Pushkin sonnet. As opposed to the Italian—or Petrarchan—sonnet and the Elizabethan—or Shakespearean—sonnet, the fourteen-line Pushkin sonnet is not obviously divided into smaller stanzas of four or two lines. Furthermore, while Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter, Pushkin wrote his verse-novel in iambic tetrameter. Another distinction the Pushkin sonnet has is an unusual rhyme scheme: aBaBccDDeFFeGG, where lowercase letters represent feminine rhymes (stressed on the next-to-last syllable) and the uppercase represent masculine rhymes (stress on the final syllable). Intellectually combining comedy with seriousness, the Pushkin

sonnet is a compelling form that is easy to read and incredibly difficult to write.

**A New Direction for Russian Literature** In his prose, Pushkin rejected the literary tradition that considered fiction an inferior genre. Pushkin's movement away from sentimental fiction of the late eighteenth century signaled a new direction for Russian literature. Scholars note that the realistic scenes and characters in *Eugene Onegin* provided a model for his nineteenth-century successors, including the notable writers Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, and Nikolai Gogol. All have acknowledged their debt to Pushkin, whose work continues to influence even the modern Russian novel.

### Works in Critical Context

Although Pushkin is rarely read outside his homeland, many critics recognize him as the greatest and most influential Russian writer in history. Scholars attribute this lack of foreign readership to the fact that Pushkin's style is difficult to translate. For instance, while Pushkin's combination of vernacular speech and Slavic language appeals to Russian readers, his stylistic qualities and subtlety of characterization and plot development deny translation beyond the literal. Pushkin's admirers are quick to point out that while foreign readers might not be directly acquainted with his works, almost every Russian composer of note and several European ones have some work based on one of Pushkin's writings.

***Eugene Onegin*** Critics agree that *Eugene Onegin* is Pushkin's masterpiece, representing, says V. G. Belinsky in *Two Hundred Years of Pushkin*, "an encyclopedia of Russian life." Because of the novel's literary range and importance, analytical approaches to the work are varied and numerous. Some critics have concentrated on the fundamental symmetries of *Eugene Onegin*, such as the ironic reversals, parallels in plot, and behavior of the characters. Still others examine the meaning of particular specific events, such as Tania's disturbing dream after Onegin rejects her.

Many scholars address the motivations of Onegin. Based on what they have interpreted as Pushkin's disguised critique of Russian social conditions, Soviet critics have promoted the character of Onegin as a conspirator against Tsar Nicholas I. Still other critics have designated Onegin to be an early manifestation of the Russian social type known as the superfluous man, a man alienated by Russian society, who, stifled by social conditions, is prevented from doing anything worthwhile. Less complex are the appraisals of Onegin's potential for love and his accountability in matters of the heart.

**Twentieth-Century Criticism** At the beginning of the twentieth century, critical evaluation of Pushkin's work focused on his implied negative assessments of character and society. In the later years of the century, interest in Pushkin's fiction, drama, and narrative poetry

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In writing the verse-novel *Eugene Onegin*, Pushkin established the Pushkin sonnet, an intricate poetic form. Because of its complexity, most writers choose to compose sonnets in the more traditional Italian or Elizabethan forms. Some modern writers, however, have tried their hand at the Pushkin sonnet with successful results. Below are examples of their works:

*The Ghost Writer* (2007), a verse-novel by Andy Croft.

Based on *Hamlet*, this detective story features spies, ghosts, poets, and hopeless lovers.

*The Golden Gate* (1986), a novel by Vikram Seth. A satirical romance set in San Francisco, this work of fiction is composed of 690 sonnets.

*The Hasty Papers: The Millennium Edition of the Legendary 1960 One-Shot Review* (1999), reviews of art and literature first collected in 1960 by Alfred Leslie. This fascinating collection, popular within literary and artistic communities for its daring ideas, includes Leslie's poem "The Story of the *Hasty Papers*," written in Pushkin's sonnet form.

remained strong, with more contemporary scholars examining his body of works through a psychoanalytic approach. In doing so, these scholars tend to devote their attention to elements of irony and parody. Additionally, they often evaluate Pushkin's experiments in narrative structure and technique. Perhaps philosopher and writer Alexander Herzen, whose essay appears in *Alexander Pushkin: A Symposium on the 175th Anniversary of His Birth*, offers the best critical approach to Pushkin's writings: "As soon as he appeared he became necessary, as though Russian literature could never again dispense with him. The other Russian poets are read and admired; Pushkin is in the hands of every civilized Russian, who reads him again and again all his life long."

### Responses to Literature

- Pushkin had success with writing in a variety of literary styles, including verse, aphorism, and drama. Why do you think he experimented with so many different genres? Did any form in particular have a bigger effect than other forms on his success as a writer? Explain why or why not.
- After reading several examples of Pushkin sonnets, write a Pushkin sonnet of your own on any subject you choose. Follow the rhyme scheme aBaBccD-DeFFeGG, where lowercase letters represent feminine rhymes and the uppercase represent masculine rhymes. Why do you think the Pushkin sonnet form is not as widely used as the Italian and Elizabethan sonnet forms?

3. Traditionally, Pushkin is the most revered and most read Russian writer. Even today, most Russians can recite verses of his poetry. What is your concept of a national literature? How did Pushkin contribute to the image of a writer who is also a leading political, cultural, and ideological figure?
4. Research the reign of Tsar Nicholas I. Why was the tsar afraid of Pushkin's work? Prepare your findings and discuss them with your classmates.

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## François Rabelais

BORN: 1494, *Chinon, France*

DIED: 1553, *Paris, France*

NATIONALITY: *French*

GENRE: *Fiction*

MAJOR WORKS:

*Pantagruel, King of the Dipsodes, with His Heroic Acts and Prowesses* (1532)

*The Inestimable Life of the Great Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel* (1534)

*Third Book of the Heroic Deeds and Sayings of the Good Pantagruel* (1546)

*Fourth Book of the Heroic Deeds and Sayings of the Good Pantagruel* (1552)

*The Ringing Island* (1562)

### Overview

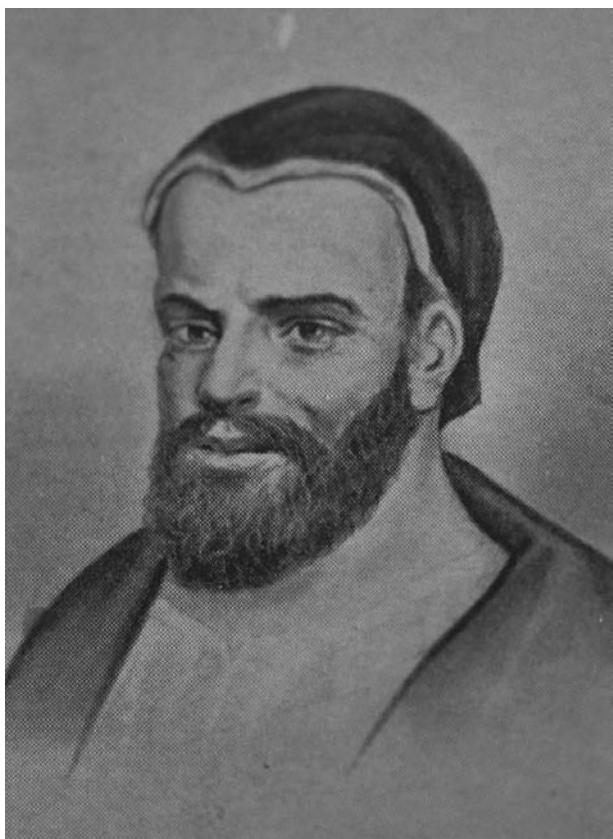
A Renaissance monk, physician, and scholar, François Rabelais is best remembered today for his *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–1564), a multivolume narrative comprising comedy, satire, myth, and humanist philosophy and detailing the epic stories of two giants' upbringing, ribald adventures, and journeys toward self-discovery. A prominent influence on writers from Laurence Sterne to James Joyce, Rabelais has been described as “the miracle of the sixteenth century” by Anatole France, and is often considered the French equivalent of William Shakespeare and one of the half-dozen or so giants of world literature.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

***Discovery and Confiscation of Secretly Acquired Texts***  
Although important dates and biographical events of his life remain uncertain, it is believed that Rabelais was born around 1494 into a wealthy family in Chinon and was

tutored at home as a child. He received a formal education at a Franciscan monastery in Poitou. Despite imposition of a severely confined curriculum there, Rabelais and a fellow monk began to independently study many of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew classics prohibited by the Church. Acquiring in a short time considerable knowledge of secular history, myth, and humanist thought, Rabelais began composing letters in a mixture of Latin and Greek to Guillaume Budé and Desiderius Erasmus, Christian humanists whom he admired for their forthright views and unwillingness to bow to Church dogmatism. He also completed at this time Latin translations of the Greek satires of Lucian, a writer whose style and imagination markedly influenced Rabelais's later prose. Yet, with the monastery's discovery and confiscation of his secretly acquired classical texts, Rabelais's pursuit of scholarly interests as well as his monastic career were seriously threatened. Fortunately, he received the patronage and protection of a high-ranking friend, Bishop Geoffroy d'Estissac, who accepted Rabelais into the Benedictine order at Saint-Pierre-de-Maillzeais in 1524.

***Travel and Career as a Physician*** As d'Estissac's secretary, Rabelais traveled with the bishop throughout his diocese and became intimately acquainted with rural peoples, acquiring a keen ear for rustic dialects, popular tales, and an appreciation of simple existence—all of which heavily imbued his fictional world. Following two years under d'Estissac, Rabelais set out on his own as a secular priest and aspiring physician who traveled about France teaching and studying. In 1530 he entered the widely esteemed University of Montpellier, where he obtained a medical degree. He soon gained renown as a talented lecturer, doctor, and editor-translator of works by the Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen, proving instrumental in reviving and incorporating their theories into contemporary medical practice. Because of his reputation and accomplishments in the field, Rabelais was appointed chief physician in 1532 to the well-known Hotel Dieu in Lyon.



François Rabelais *Rabelais, François, photograph. The Library of Congress.*

**Pantagruel: A Sudden Switch in Literary Attention** After editing further Latin and Greek texts that year, Rabelais surprised his colleagues by composing and publishing an apparently frivolous narrative in French, a language that at the time was considered undignified, even vulgar, by the Latin-oriented Church and aristocracy. There has been much speculation as to why Rabelais so suddenly switched his literary attention; some thought there was a strictly financial motivation due to personal financial problems while others believed that he had yearned for some time to unleash his convivial wit, cherished by patients, students, and friends in order to entertain as well as educate a wider audience. In any event, *Pantagruel, King of the Dipsodes, with His Heroic Acts and Prowesses* (1532) proved a huge, instantaneous success. First appearing at the annual Lyons fair, and modeled after a recently published, popular chapbook tale of Arthurian giants (*Les grandes et inestimables chroniques du grand et enorme geant Gargantua*), Rabelais's work met with a captive readership, particularly as *Pantagruel*, unlike its predecessor, contained allusions to current events and more vividly portrayed human life under the humorous guise of gianthood—a fantastic realm then in vogue with French readers. This work was soon revised and expanded and accompanied by two shorter works: ludicrous astronomical predictions by Rabelais's narrator

Alcofribas Nasier (an anagram of the author's name) for 1533 and 1534.

**Allusions and Allegories in Later Writing** In October of 1533, *Pantagruel* was denounced by the Sorbonne for excessive obscenity; however, no immediate restrictions were placed on Rabelais. Early the next year Rabelais left Lyons for Rome as companion and personal physician to bishop and diplomat Jean du Bellay. For the next decade Rabelais periodically assisted du Bellay and his brother Guillaume, governor of the Piedmont region of Italy, in various capacities. Primarily, he served as family physician and intermediary in attempts to reconcile Catholic and Protestant factions, who had been at odds since German monk Martin Luther's revolutionary pronouncements against abuses by the Roman Catholic Church in 1517 sparked the Protestant Reformation. Between his travels and official service Rabelais continued to practice and study medicine. He also honed and expanded his literary skills, publishing sequels to *Pantagruel* in 1534, 1546, and 1552. The first of these, *The Inestimable Life of the Great Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel*, represents Rabelais's attempt to re-create the myth of Gargantua, father of his first fictive hero. Due to the chronological precedence of its story *Gargantua* has been placed first in sequence by editors of Rabelais's work. Next came the *Third* and *Fourth* books, the last to be positively attributed to Rabelais; in these works, the giant element is downplayed and a greater emphasis is placed on the quest for truth and meaning in life. More complex in structure, more copious in allusion and ambiguity, these later books greatly contributed to Rabelais's posthumous reputation as a profound thinker and allegorist. All four books, at the time, were condemned by the Sorbonne, whose members thought Rabelais an immoral Lutheran sympathizer. Rabelais was also censured by the extreme Protestant wing of the Calvinists, who deemed him a dangerous proponent of atheistic values.

Despite such religious opposition, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* remained immensely popular with a wide cross-section of people, from liberal intellectuals to marginally educated laboring classes. Due to Rabelais's several influential acquaintances, the publication and sale of his books were protected by royal edict; however, it is believed that Rabelais was occasionally hounded by various religious authorities because of his works and was forced, from time to time, to leave the country.

**Last Years and Unsolved Mysteries** In his last years, Rabelais was granted religious offices at Meudon and Saint-Christophe-du-Jambet through the patronage of Jean du Bellay. He resigned these offices for unknown reasons in 1553 and died shortly thereafter. Nine years later *The Ringing Island* (1562) appeared in print under Rabelais's name. The majority of scholars recognize this work as a largely authentic continuation of the *Pantagruel* story. This publication was followed by *The Fifth and Last Book of the Heroic Deeds and Sayings of the Good*

*Pantagruel* (1564), which included *The Ringing Island* as its first sixteen chapters. The authenticity of the latter portion of this work, given its predominantly unrelieved moralistic tenor, has been seriously questioned, and the issue remains unresolved.

### Works in Literary Context

The difficulty of interpreting Rabelais's work is made apparent by the wide-ranging, conflicting analyses it has received. Some critics perceive a dominant comic element, others a decidedly satiric strain, and still others a comprehensive fictional plan that incorporates these and other elements in a highly individual, joyful affirmation of humanity. What can be agreed upon by most scholars is that *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is an overwhelmingly rich and complex narrative mosaic that contains references to Greek philosophy and the Bible, relentless linguistic experimentation, Christian humanism, and an underlying Renaissance concern with the spiritual and intellectual perfection of the individual.

**Low Humor and High Concepts** There is a central division in Rabelais's work between wise, occasionally profound prose and superficial, rollicking entertainment. Through modern analyses, scholars have shown that despite several bawdy, off-color episodes and seemingly aimless, digressive language, *Gargantua* does move gradually toward higher concerns. In the closing chapter to Book II, Gargantua builds a religious abbey for his aide and confidante Friar Jean. The abbey, for its rules reinforcing equality and adoption of Renaissance principles of education and open-mindedness, is regarded as Rabelais's idealized conception of a new world order. The inscription on one of its cornerstones ("Do what thou wilt") combined with an emphasis on responsible, active participation in God's community on earth, represent ideals that Rabelais returns to throughout the novel in various ways, often cloaking his humanist beliefs in irony, humor, and allegory.

**A Master of Language** Central to Rabelais's artistic world, and to his humanist conception of life, was the potency, magic, and unlimited appeal of human language itself. Often compared to prose experimentalist James Joyce, Rabelais released in his books a pyrotechnical display of verbal constructs and linguistic games widely considered excelled only by those of *Finnegans Wake* (1939). Yet such inventiveness, and a purported inattention to plot and relevant detail, has provoked some harsh criticism of his work. Many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars took his ribald, seemingly amoral humor and madcap verbiage at face value, and labeled the author a drunken fool with a prolific, profane pen rather than a serious writer with a uniquely organized and effectively expressed message for the world. However, most later critics acknowledge the serious intent of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and accept the wordplay, circuitous narrative,

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rabelais's famous contemporaries include:

**Francisco Pizarro** (1471–1541): Spanish conquistador and conqueror of the Inca. The year that *Pantagruel* was published, Pizarro landed in Peru; within a year, the Incan emperor was dead and Pizarro was master of the former empire.

**Suleiman I** (1494–1566): Called "the Magnificent" and "the Lawgiver," Suleiman was sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1566, during which time the empire reached its zenith in political, military, and economic power.

**Anne Boleyn** (1501–1536): The second wife of King Henry VIII of England, Anne Boleyn was infamously beheaded in the Tower of London after failing to provide Henry with a male heir.

**Niccolò Machiavelli** (1469–1527): Italian diplomat best known for his works of political philosophy, most notably *The Prince*. His emphasis on realistic appraisal of political gain, and the often cutthroat means needed to achieve it, led to the term *Machiavellian*. Ironically, the book was not published until after Machiavelli's death and is not representative of his writings during his lifetime.

**Nostradamus** (1503–1566): Michel de Nostradame—remembered today by his Latinized pen name—was a French apothecary, or pharmacist, who claimed to have prophetic vision. His *Prophecies*, made up of one thousand quatrains written in obscure, arcane riddles, have been claimed by many to predict a variety of major historical events in the ensuing centuries.

and occasional grossness as the natural outpourings of a literary genius artistically intoxicated with life at its fullest, and language at its richest. Rabelais has exerted influence over a wide range of authors including Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, Jonathan Swift, Anatole France, John Cowper Powys, D. B. Wyndham Lewis, Lucien Febvre, Aleister Crowley, Milan Kundera, Robertson Davies, and Maria Theotoky, among others.

### Works in Critical Context

Scores of editions of Rabelais's writings have appeared since 1532, including almost a hundred during that first century alone; and while the specific historical context that polarized his early readers has disappeared, his works have continued to fuel controversy, eliciting passionate responses from both admirers and detractors. In the seventeenth century his writings found particular favor with libertine authors such as Cyrano de Bergerac and Paul

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rabelais reveled in experimenting with language use and construction through his writings. Here are some other works that demonstrate such experimentation with language:

*Finnegans Wake* (1939), a novel by James Joyce. Seventeen years in the making, Joyce's last novel remains controversial to this day due to its combination of stream-of-consciousness style and literary and linguistic allusions, along with a complete lack of traditional conceptions of plot and character development.

*HIM* (1928), a play by e. e. cummings. An avant-garde poet, cummings also wrote novels, children's books, and plays, all of which experiment with language and structure. Of *HIM*, cummings said, "DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU."

*Zazie in the Metro* (1959), a novel by Raymond Queneau. The French language remains, in its standard form, highly structured and regulated. Queneau's novel is written entirely in a nonstandard, "colloquial" form.

*Tarantula* (1966), an experimental novel by Bob Dylan. Part poem, part novel, Dylan's stream-of-consciousness work is as challenging and impenetrable as his song lyrics from the same time.

Scarron, but classical writers, with the exception of Molière and Jean de La Fontaine, were generally less enthusiastic. Jean de La Bruyère called Rabelais's works "a monstrous assemblage of fine and ingenious morality and filthy corruption." Voltaire criticized his "miserable use" of his wit.

**Rescued by the Romantics** Rabelais's critical fortunes improved dramatically in the nineteenth century, when Romantic writers and critics—enamored of the past, and with a penchant for verbal excess and the grotesque imagination—labeled Rabelais a literary genius. This view has endured in modern times, as evidenced by the wealth of scholarship focused on his texts, and by his influence on authors as diverse as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Raymond Queneau, and James Joyce.

Much earlier than Joyce and before Thomas Urquhart's first translations in 1653, English-speaking readers discovered and came to love Rabelais. According to the *Old English Dictionary*, the terms *Gargantuan* and *gargantuan* date from the end of the sixteenth century. Early modern writers including Sir Philip Sidney, Francis Bacon, Ben Jonson, and John Donne either refer to or quote Rabelais, and his influence on Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) and on Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) is widely acknowledged.

**Modern Interpretation** Virtually all scholars of European letters have affirmed Rabelais's immense importance to the development of European literature and thought. As Mikhail Bakhtin has declared: "His place in history among the creators of modern European writing, such as Dante [Alighieri], [Giovanni] Boccaccio, [William] Shakespeare, and [Miguel de] Cervantes, is not subject to doubt. Rabelais not only determined the fate of French literature and of the French literary tongue, but influenced the fate of world literature as well (probably no less than Cervantes)."

### Responses to Literature

1. Summarize the spirited philosophy of the Abbey of Theleme in a short essay. How did it differ from real-world abbeys of Rabelais's time?
2. Cite examples of Rabelaisian forms of humor, including pun, jest, joke, satire, hyperbole, sight gag, and incongruity. What are some examples from modern movies or books that use similar forms of humor?
3. Rabelais angered both Catholics and Protestants, albeit for different reasons. Summarize and explain why he was so hated. Why do you think Rabelais rebelled against his Catholic peers' conservatism?
4. Rabelais's maxim "Do what thou wilt" was later taken up by infamous twentieth-century occultist Aleister Crowley as his personal credo. He stated, "'Do as thou wilt' shall be the whole of the law." Do you agree with this? What are the advantages and disadvantages to letting everyone do what they please?

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## Jean Racine

BORN: 1639, *La Ferte-Milon, France*

DIED: 1699

NATIONALITY: *French*

GENRE: *Drama, poetry*

MAJOR WORKS:

*Bajazet* (1672)

*Mithridate* (1673)

*Iphigenie* (1674)

*Phèdre* (1677)

*Esther* (1689)

### Overview

Jean Racine has long been held as one of the foremost dramatic writers in the whole of French literature, though his fame rests essentially on ten plays. Most of his plays are still regularly performed, some of them even in translation, in spite of their being exceptionally difficult to translate because of his unique style of poetry. Racine usually borrowed his dramatic subjects from mythology and constructed his plays using a high-style neoclassical tragic form.



Jean Racine *Racine, Jean, photograph. The Library of Congress.*

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Orphaned but Well Educated** Baptized on December 22, 1639, Racine was presumably born a few days before this date in the small town of La Ferté-Milon in the province of Champagne, some fifty miles northeast of Paris, to a lower-middle-class family. His father, also named Jean, occupied a modest and poorly paid position in the tax-collecting bureaucracy. In January 1641, Racine's mother, Jeanne Sconin Racine, died while giving birth to her second child, Marie. In February 1643, the children's father, who had remarried three months earlier, also died, leaving Racine and his sister destitute. Their paternal grandparents took charge of the boy, the maternal grandparents of the girl.

In October 1649, the young Racine was enrolled as a nonpaying student at the "Petites Écoles" (Little Schools) in Cheureuse. The school provided him with a superior education, which, contrary to the then prevailing fashion, was conducted not in Latin but in French and emphasized a close study of the vernacular. It included a sustained study of Latin and Greek—in which Racine soon became remarkably fluent—as well as the modern languages of Spanish and Italian. After his four years at Port-Royal, Racine entered the Collège de Beauvais in Paris, an institution sympathetic to the abbey, where he studied for two years, returning to Port-Royal in the fall of 1655. He spent three more years as a student there before entering the Collège d'Harcourt in Paris, where he studied for a final year (1658–1659), completing an education of virtually unparalleled scope and quality, one far superior to what a destitute and provincial orphan could have hoped for.

**Success and Rivalry** Several years later, having entered into friendships with writers Molière, Jean de La Fontaine, and Nicolas Boileau, he began writing for the Parisian stage, with the neoclassical theorist Boileau being an especially strong influence upon him. In 1664 Racine's *The Thebans* was produced by Molière, who also launched the young dramatist's second play, *Alexander the Great*, the next year; these works brought their author much acclaim.

When *Alexander* opened, Racine made the first of several key decisions that brought him strained relations with friends—if not influential enemies—throughout his career. Immediately dissatisfied by Molière's production of *Alexander* at the Palais-Royal, he mounted a rival production at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, deeply offending Molière and ending their friendship.

At about the same time, due to a misunderstanding, Racine publicly broke with the Jansenist Catholics of Port-Royal (a particular branch of Catholics whose beliefs centered on original sin and human depravity) by publishing an open letter—which he later regretted—filled with ill-spirited caricatures of and anecdotes about key

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Racine's famous contemporaries include:

- Pierre Corneille** (1606–1684): Corneille was a French playwright considered one of the greatest French dramatists of the seventeenth century.
- John Milton** (1608–1674): Milton was an English poet and civil servant best known for his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667).
- Molière** (1622–1673): Molière, born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, was a French playwright considered one of the masters of the comedic play.
- Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662): Pascal was a French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher who contributed to the development of modern economics and social science.
- John Locke** (1632–1704): Locke was an English philosopher and one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers. He also made significant contributions to American Revolutionary thought.
- Louis XIV** (1638–1715): Louis became the King of France at age four and ruled until his death over seventy years later. He is also known as Louis the Great and The Sun King.
- Isaac Newton** (1642–1726): Newton was an English scientist and mathematician who laid the groundwork for classical mechanics, the view that dominated the scientific view of the physical universe for the next three centuries.

Jansenist figures. Having split with the Jansenists and now considered a rising rival of Pierre Corneille, Racine embraced the worldliness of the Parisian dramatic world, took actresses for mistresses, and actively competed in dramatic popularity with the older writer. In the drama *Britannicus* he not only ventured into political drama, at the time considered Corneille's exclusive domain, but he also attacked Corneille himself (though not by name) in his introduction, having come to believe that a plot led by Corneille had sought to undermine his drama's success. He also answered Corneille's *El Cid* with his own *Andromache* (1667) and pitted his superior *Berenice* (1670) against Corneille's *Tite et Berenice*, which appeared almost simultaneously.

Racine's most distinguished plays appeared during the next few years, and in 1674, he was elected to the Académie Française, becoming its youngest member. But by the mid 1670s, the ill will he had engendered among his peers and their admirers affected his own career. One of his more powerful enemies, the Duchesse de Bouillon—a niece of Cardinal Mazarin and sister of the Duc de Nevers—learned of Racine's *Phaedra* during

its composition and persuaded a minor dramatist, Jacques Pradon, to write a rival version of the play, which opened two days after Racine's production. Further, it is said that she reserved many of the main seats for the earliest performances of Racine's play, leaving these seats empty on the crucial opening nights. Although *Phaedra* was eventually seen as superior to Pradon's tragedy, Racine was badly shaken by this episode and its aftermath, which included having his personal safety threatened by the Duc de Nevers.

**Retirement and Revival** At the height of his career, Racine retired from the professional theater; he married, became the devoted father of seven children, and accepted the post of Royal Historiographer, a position he shared with Boileau. For two decades Racine enjoyed access to the most influential political and literary circles; he and Boileau also traveled with Louis XIV on military campaigns, recording the Sun King's exploits.

In 1689, at the request of Louis XIV's wife, Madame de Maintenon, Racine produced a new play, *Esther*, based on the biblical story, which was performed at a religious school in Saint-Cyr. Praised by the king himself, this play was so well received that Racine wrote another biblical drama, *Athaliah*, which was performed at Saint-Cyr two years later. During his remaining years, he wrote four spiritual hymns and a history of Port-Royal. Racine died in 1699 after a long illness.

### Works in Literary Context

With Pierre Corneille, Racine was one of the premier authors of French dramatic tragedy during the reign of Louis XIV. Similar to Greek tragedy and Corneille's works, Racine's plays emphasize the exposition of character and spiritual conflict, eliminating nearly everything not central to each drama's theme. His accomplishment was summarized in glowing terms by Anatole France, who wrote that Racine's "period, his education, and his nature, conspired together to make of him the most perfect of French poets, and the greatest by reason of the sustained nobility of his work."

Racine's death marked the virtual demise of the literary genre he had so ably illustrated. In the century that followed, many tragedies were written in emulation of Racine's, but none succeeded in matching his, and almost none have survived, in spite of the talent of some of their authors, Voltaire in particular. Not until the early nineteenth century did critics finally realize that, with Racine, French tragedy had reached both its zenith and the beginning of its decline.

Several scholars note that within Racine's work, the world of Jansenist Port-Royal and the neoclassical world were in constant warfare. But, these worlds were arguably complementary, in both style and in form. The influence of Jansenist teaching, which stressed human depravity and predestined salvation, is evident in Racine's dramatic

characters, who—like their forerunners in classical Greek drama—are undone by their passions and driven to ruin by ungovernable impulses. The simple neoclassical tragic form was well fitted to Racine's themes and poetic style, which has been praised for its simplicity, harmony, and rhythmic flow; of all his contemporaries, Racine was the first to achieve success within a framework which had been deemed too difficult to master since its inception during the Italian Renaissance.

His style has been described as simple yet polished, smooth yet natural. Robert Lowell has praised Racine's dramatic verse for its "diamond edge" and "hard, electric rage," calling Racine "perhaps the greatest poet in the French language." In most of his plays, Racine employed a basic plot structure in which a monarch demands something of a particular underling, often a prince or princess, who denies this demand. The monarch then attempts to force his subject's obedience, with tragic results. Launched upon a course of impending doom, Racine's characters know what must be done to avert disaster but are unable to subdue their desires to take prudent action.

### Works in Critical Context

During their author's lifetime, Racine's dramas, though popular, were attacked for what some critics considered their crude realism and their focus upon passion. Jean de La Bruyère wrote of Corneille and Racine that "the former paints men as they should be, the latter paints men as they are." Like La Bruyée, many critics compare the intentions and accomplishments of Racine with those of Corneille, often to Racine's advantage. "Unlike Corneille," wrote Irving Babbitt, "Racine moved with perfect ease among all the rules that the neo-classic disciplinarians had imposed upon the stage. Indeed, it is in Racine, if anywhere, that all this regulating of the drama must find its justification," here speaking of the unities of time, space, and action prescribed by neoclassical theorists.

Over time, Racine's work grew in critical stature and popularity. In one of the seminal discourses upon Racine's achievement, *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823–25), Stendhal wrote of Racine—in his preoccupation with passion—as an artist of romantisme, the literary element which satisfies an ever-changing standard of beauty. Several scholars have compared the theatricality of Shakespeare and Racine, with David Maskell observing that they "provide examples of a common visual vocabulary which is the peculiar feature of theatrical language, and which unites dramatists who can exploit its rich potential."

Other major French critics of Racine's work have included Jules Lemaitre, Ferdinand Brunetiere, Jean Giraudoux, Francois Mauriac, and Roland Barthes, while English-language criticism and translation of Racine's works has been dominated by Martin Turnell, Geoffrey Brereton, and Kenneth Muir, among others. Many scholars concur in spirit with the judgment of George Saint-

### COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Racine's works are filled with characters who are undone by their passions and driven to ruin by their ungovernable impulses. Here are some other works with similar characters and storylines:

*Oedipus Rex* (429 b.c.e.), a play by Sophocles. This play, considered one of the greatest examples of ancient Greek drama, tells the story of one man's prophesied fall as he kills his father and marries his mother.

*Othello, The Moor of Venice* (1603), a play by William Shakespeare. This play deals with racism, love, jealousy, and betrayal in a setting of political intrigue.

*The Cid* (1637), a play by Pierre Corneille. This play tells the story of a man facing the eternal human struggle to balance personal sentiment with duty to family and society.

bury, who wrote of Racine, "Of the whole world which is subject to the poet he took only a narrow artificial and conventional fraction. Within these narrow bounds he did work which no admirer of literary craftsmanship can regard without satisfaction."

### Responses to Literature

1. Racine displays an interest in strong, troubled female characters. In a five-page essay, explain how his depictions are relevant for understanding the women of today. What has changed in society since Racine's time to make these characters lose their relevance, and what has remained the same to give these characters continued relevance?
2. Racine made use of themes borrowing from ancient Greek drama and popularized during his time. With a group of your classmates, brainstorm Racine's common themes, then discuss whether or not these themes are still relevant today. Would a revival of literary work based on these themes produce works that a present-day audience would appreciate and admire?
3. Many of Racine's characters face inner, spiritual conflicts among competing values and impulses. Using one of Racine's texts as inspiration, write a short story with a main character who faces a similar conflict.
4. Racine's plays were based on a plot structure centered around the demands of a monarch. Sketch a plot outline to rewrite and update one of his plays, placing the action in the context of a modern, democratic government.

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Terence Rattigan *Rattigan, Sir Terence, photograph*. AP Images.

## Terence Rattigan

BORN: 1911, London, England

DIED: 1977, Hamilton, Bermuda

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Winslow Boy* (1946)  
*The Browning Version* (1948)  
*The Deep Blue Sea* (1952)  
*Separate Tables* (1954)  
*Variation on a Theme* (1958)

## Overview

British playwright Terence Rattigan is best known for his creation of failed middle-class characters who are mired in the mundane conflicts of marriage, family, and work. His forty-year writing career brought critical acclaim as well as derision; his well-crafted dramas, so popular with audiences of the 1940s, would be considered unfashionable during the late 1950s. His most widely praised early stage dramas, *The Winslow Boy* (1946) and *The Browning Version* (1948), represent Rattigan's interest in the class struggles and personal conflicts of the educational system.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Making a Career as a Playwright** Terence Rattigan was born June 10, 1911, in London, England, to William Frank Arthur and Vera Houston Rattigan. His father held diplomatic posts around Europe, including stints as acting high commissioner in Turkey and British minister in Romania. While his parents lived abroad, Rattigan and his brother, Brian, lived with their paternal grandmother in South Kensington. Rattigan attended Mr. Hornby's School at Sandroyd, Harrow, then received a scholarship to Trinity College, Oxford, where he prepared himself for a diplomatic career like his father's. Included in this experience were summers spent at foreign-language schools in France and Germany; however, Rattigan never entered the service, choosing instead to study history, act, and write for the *Cherwell*, an Oxford student newspaper.

While he was still in college, Rattigan had written a play, *First Episode*, that had brief and disastrous runs in London and New York City. Rattigan was undaunted by the failure and quit college to pursue a career in the theater. His father disapproved of his career plans but agreed to finance the aspiring playwright for two years. As his part of the bargain, Rattigan promised his father that if he was still unsuccessful after the two years had elapsed, he would begin a career in diplomacy or

banking. Shortly before the probationary period expired, Rattigan's *French Without Tears* (1936) became a smash hit in London. More success was to follow. Rattigan is the only dramatist to have written two plays that ran for more than one thousand performances apiece in London.

During the 1930s, Rattigan collaborated on a number of productions: *Follow My Leader* (with Anthony Maurice in 1940), *Grey Farm* (with Hector Bolitho, produced in 1940), and an adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (with John Gielgud, produced in 1950).

**Military Service and War Dramas** In April 1940, shortly after the news of Hitler's attack on Denmark and Norway, Rattigan enlisted in the Royal Air Force. He served as a wireless operator and later as a flight lieutenant and gunnery officer. Rattigan was in a new environment, surrounded by men with varied backgrounds. He wrote *Flare Path* (1940), a play about his wartime experiences; it was the first of three dramas about the war. *While the Sun Shines* (1943) and *Love in Idleness* (1944), retitled *O Mistress Mine* when produced in 1946 in New York, complete the trio.

**Popular Acclaim** After the war, Rattigan's career continued to progress, starting with *The Winslow Boy* (1946) and *The Browning Version*. In these works, Rattigan concentrates on the lives of students and teachers in the academic world. The plays investigate how individuals cope with humiliation and injustice. Andrew Crocker-Harris is typical of these characters. The mediocre schoolmaster of *The Browning Version* watches as his students deride him, his employers fire him, and his wife has an affair with a younger teacher.

The 1950s were golden years for Rattigan. He was adapting his plays as films, and original screenplays were providing ample means for his lavish lifestyle. His most popular works during this period, *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952), *Separate Tables* (1954), and *Variation on a Theme* (1958), explored the lives of a variety of mismatched couples who show their unhappiness through a series of ill-fated affairs. These plays also directly confront the homosexuality of characters that had long been only implicit in Rattigan's plays.

**Old-Fashioned Playwright** In 1956, the Royal Court stage exploded with the production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, an avant-garde play that transformed the theater. Rattigan's next three plays felt the impact of that wave, receiving few positive reviews. Feeling his label as an old-fashioned writer of well-made plays, Rattigan took a leave of absence and traveled the world. He devoted much time to writing for film and television, including the movies *The V.I.P.s* (1963) and *The Yellow Rolls Royce* (1965).

One of Rattigan's last plays, *In Praise of Love* (1973), focuses on the relationships of a terminally ill cancer patient. Rattigan himself contracted bone marrow

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rattigan's famous contemporaries include:

**Harry Truman** (1884–1972): Thirty-third president of the United States, Truman assumed the office upon the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1945. Four months later he became the first and only world leader to order the use of nuclear weapons in war.

**Laurence Olivier** (1907–1989): Perhaps the most widely praised English actor of the twentieth century, Olivier maintained widespread popularity and critical acclaim over the course of his five-decade career on stage and screen.

**Jesse Owens** (1913–1980): An African American track and field athlete, Owens became an international superstar after winning four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, an event that had been turned by Hitler's Nazi regime into a would-be showcase for the supposed superiority of racially "pure" German athletes.

**Mohammad Reza Pahlavi** (1919–1980): Shah (monarch) of Iran from 1941 until he was deposed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Pahlavi was a controversial figure in his own country, accused of using torture and imprisonment to silence opponents and promoting Western interests ahead of his subjects.

**L. Sprague de Camp** (1907–2000): De Camp was a major figure in science fiction and fantasy literature during the twentieth century. Over a five-decade career, he wrote more than one hundred books and chronicled and collected the works of early giants of the genre, from H. P. Lovecraft to Robert E. Howard.

cancer in 1975. His final stage play, *Cause Célèbre* (1977), based on a famous English trial of the 1930s, investigates the desperate yet criminal passion of Alma Rattenbury and her young lover. Though very ill at the time, Rattigan was able to attend the play's opening performance. He died from the disease on November 30, 1977.

### Works in Literary Context

Rattigan's works are best characterized as extended and unsentimental examinations of the small victories and defeats that occur in the daily lives of middle-class individuals. Rattigan's predilection for bourgeois characters and middle-class values aroused the disdain of some critics and the approbation of others. Characters rather than ideas are emphasized in Rattigan's plays. He contended that "character makes the play" not only in serious plays but also in farce.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rattigan's plays often discuss the consequences of repressed emotion and unfulfilled desires. Works in a similar vein include:

*A Doll's House* (1879), by Henrik Ibsen. Highly controversial at the time, this play made a name for Ibsen and continues to be studied and produced today thanks to its unconventional ending and taut characterization of the lies and hypocrisies of married life.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), a poem by T. S. Eliot. This classic poem relays the thoughts of a man seemingly paralyzed by his inability to act on his desires.

*Death of a Salesman* (1949), by Arthur Miller. Miller explores the failure of the American Dream through the character of Willie Loman, the archetypal pitiful dreamer, full of unrealized dreams and still chasing after a goal that will forever elude him and his doomed family.

*The Remains of the Day* (1989), a novel by Kazuo Ishiguro. In this Booker Prize-winning novel, an aging butler reflects upon a missed opportunity at love with a former coworker.

Rapidly changing times and the interaction of personal lives with the events of those times form the subject matter of Rattigan's dramas. Conflicts between fathers and sons, marital mismatches, the English habit of repressed emotion, sexual hypocrisies, and the right of the most insignificant individual to be heard and understood are themes that recur in his works, regardless of genre. Early comedies, the middle serious dramas, and the later mellowed character studies of his last plays contain these themes from *First Episode* in 1933 through *Cause Célèbre* in 1977.

**The Well-Made Play** Virtually all commentators concede that Rattigan was a master craftsman. His career is marked by a consistency both of theme and of dramatic structure: he was fond of the two-act, middle-class tragedy. Yet, the traditions of the Scribean well-made play and the English problem play have haunted the reviews and criticism of Rattigan's dramas. What was frequently overlooked was his adaptation of these traditions to serve his own purposes of style and theme.

Rattigan's dramas did not conclude with artificially happy endings but with unresolved or only partially resolved conflicts and ambivalences of the unhappy or tortured characters. The disillusionment his characters experience is countered by the dignity with which they confront their problems and carry on with what remains of their lives. The characters, unsentimentally portrayed,

are the more sympathetic for their flaws. Some proof of their enduring quality is seen in the constant revivals of the plays. To achieve character-centered drama, Rattigan adapted well-made-play conventions to his dramatization of the damaging effects of repressive, intolerant societal attitudes toward aberrant behavior.

### Works in Critical Context

During a career that spanned nearly forty years, Terence Rattigan wrote twenty-four dramas for the stage and more than thirty film, television, and radio plays. Though he fell out of favor with the public during the 1950s, his work is regularly counted among the most enduring and well-crafted of the postwar generation.

**Early Plays** Reviewing productions of *The Winslow Boy* and *A Bequest to the Nation*, Hilary Spurling noted that "both plays are designed to take one back . . . to the days when one was proud to be an Englishman. . . . Pain and fear are discreetly underplayed in favour of the soothing virtues, courage, loyalty and perseverance in face of frightful odds." Ronald Bryden also remarked upon the traditional values espoused in *The Winslow Boy*: "Rattigan's surface self-congratulation is part of an argument that British society is strong enough to tolerate questioning, dissent, individuality. Today we can see that the quantity of reassurance was a measure of British insecurity in those post-war years. . . . But it's possible to envy the confidence still underlying the play that tolerance is something we can afford, that our sameness is sufficient to permit differences."

**French Without Tears** John Russell Taylor observed that *French Without Tears* "is under the bright, bustling surface, a gentle comedy of character, in which each seems for a moment to be faced with what he has most desired and finds that it is in fact what he most fears." While granting the effectiveness of farces like *French Without Tears*, Frederick Lumley asserted that Rattigan failed in his serious plays of character: "In his farces we do not ask that his characters should be complete individuals, whereas in a serious play that character must be a creation. The main criticism of Rattigan's work, then, is a fundamental criticism, namely, that his characters are wishy-washy creatures with neither nobility in their thoughts nor individuality in their actions. They are types we know exist, and though we might recognise them, they are certainly not people we would want as our friends."

### Responses to Literature

1. Define pathos in literary terms. Discuss the sense of pathos Rattigan evokes in *The Winslow Boy*. What techniques does he use to create this feeling?
2. Rattigan has been noted for writing middle-class tragedies. After reading *The Browning Version*, write

- an essay in which you identify the plights of Andrew Crocker-Harris and how he confronts his disillusionments.
3. *French Without Tears* is a light comedy that enjoyed considerable success during its run. Research the era and explain why the play was popular and contemporary. Do you think the play has any value in present-day theater?
  4. In a short essay, compare and contrast Andrew Crocker-Harris with Frank Hunter from *The Browning Version*.

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Dahlia Ravikovitch © ArenaPal / Topham / The Image Works

## Dahlia Ravikovitch

BORN: 1936, Ramat Gan, Israel

DIED: 2005, Tel Aviv, Israel

NATIONALITY: Israeli

GENRE: Poetry, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Love of an Orange* (1959)

*Dress of Fire* (1976)

*Real Love* (1987)

*The Window* (1989)

*Because of Love* (1998)

### Overview

At the time of her death in 2005, Dahlia Ravikovitch was revered as a champion of Palestinian rights and respected as Israel’s greatest poet. As her translators and biographers Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld note, “No other Hebrew poet, with the exception of the late Yehuda Amichai, was so universally embraced by Israelis, whatever their political convictions.” Ravikovitch’s poems have long been a fixture in Israel—being an important part of the school curriculum, adapted for theater and film, integrated for musical performances and art exhibits, and used for scholarship in several books, articles, monographs, and dissertations.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Trauma and Despair** Dahlia Ravikovitch was born on November 17, 1936, in Ramat Gan, Israel to engineer Levy (Leo) and teacher Michal Ravikovitch. By the age of three, young Dahlia was able to read and write. At four, she was designing patterns for sewing. On September 9, 1940, Ravikovitch and her mother were out doing errands on Pinsker Street when Italy bombed the city of Tel Aviv. As her mother would write to a friend a week later, according to scholar Dalia Karpel, the four-year-old screamed at the sound of what she determined was “Thunder!” Mother and daughter were trapped on the streets, witnessing the deaths of more than one hundred people and the wounding of many more.

In 1942, when Ravikovitch was six years old, her father was killed by a drunk driver. She moved with her mother to live on Kibbutz Geva, a cooperative agricultural community in Jezreel Valley. At age thirteen, Ravikovitch left the kibbutz and lived in several foster homes over the next few years. Air raids, death, abandonment, loss, and displacement came early to her, and she soon came to incorporate all as a writer attuned to despair. Such early traumatic experiences appeared in her poetry

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Ravikovitch's famous contemporaries include:

- Sylvia Plath** (1936–1963): American poet known for her startling verse with bold metaphors and stark, violent imagery.
- Václav Havel** (1936–): Czech writer and dramatist, he was the ninth and final president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic.
- Elgar Howarth** (1935–): English conductor and composer, this former trumpet player has contributed his talents the world over.
- Joe Orton** (1933–1967): English satirical playwright, he wrote risqué black comedies that shocked and amused his audiences.

as late as the 1970s, with works such as *Death in the Family* (1976).

**Higher Learning and Employment** The region Ravikovitch called home was originally a part of Palestine, as defined by British mandate at the end of World War I. Between the two world wars, the area saw substantial waves of immigration from Jewish people wishing to return to what they considered their ancestral homeland. The brutal treatment of Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II—which resulted in the deaths of millions of European Jews—led to increased calls for an established Jewish homeland. In 1948, after approval by the United Nations, Palestine was split into two regions, one of which became the nation of Israel. The area of Ravikovitch's youth became part of this new Jewish nation.

In the 1950s Ravikovitch studied English literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. By the end of the decade she had published her first volume of poetry, *The Love of an Orange* (1959). The debut work was well received by critics and established her, according to Bloch and Kronfeld, “as one of the leading voices of the post-1948 generation, alongside her elders Yehuda Amichai and Natan Zach.”

Working through the next years as a journalist and critic, a teacher, and later an editor of poetry translations, Ravikovitch produced nine more books of verse—among them two books of poetry for children—and three short story collections. She also worked translating several volumes of poetry, including those of Edgar Allan Poe, William Butler Yeats, and T. S. Eliot, among others.

**The Bell Jar Shatters** In 1982, when Israel invaded the nearby nation of Lebanon, Ravikovitch's personal poetry took on a political weight. In an interview with

Bloch and Kronfeld, Ravikovitch explained what impelled her to write political and war poetry: “Till the invasion of Lebanon, I managed somehow to go on living inside a bell jar. But then suddenly, all at once, when the invasion started, the bell jar shattered. Now there's no wall between the political and the personal. It all comes rushing in.”

**Increased Social and Political Activity** The invasion prompted Ravikovitch to use her poetic voice as a political tool. In her poem titled “You Cannot Kill A Baby Twice,” Ravikovitch describes the massacre of Palestinians in refugee camps: As the Christian Lebanese army massacred women and children in the Palestinian camps, the Israeli soldiers guarding the camps did nothing to intervene. Ravikovitch, however, could not keep her silence. In another poem, “Get Out of Beirut,” she describes how war reduces the enemy “to people who don't count.” Though showing favoritism for neither side, Ravikovitch's work was viewed as harsh and unpatriotic. In addition to writing, Ravikovitch also participated in organized protests against the displacement of Palestinians.

**Highest Accolades** Though Ravikovitch's later poems were overtly political, expressing her stand about the oppression of Palestinians and women's rights, she received multiple awards, including the esteemed Shlonsky, Brenner, and Bialik (1987) prizes; the Israel Prize (the highest national honor, 1998); and the Prime Minister's Prize (2005). The same year she was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize, in August, Ravikovitch died suddenly in her Tel Aviv apartment. Initial findings suggested she had committed suicide; however, subsequent investigation and autopsy reports now attribute her death to the likely possibility of “acute heart failure.”

### Works in Literary Context

**Influences on Classic Style** Ravikovitch scholars Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld explain that the poet's early works make use of traditional forms and are highly stylized. The language is “archaic” and resounding with biblical tones. Some of her experimental verse “draws upon surrealist parable and avant-garde opera.” Ravikovitch's early verse contains Jewish undertones and reveals such influences as that of “modernist Anglo-American poetry, particularly Eliot and the early Yeats.”

Ravikovitch's later verse is less adorned with figurative elements, according to Bloch and Kronfeld, in order to “make room for a stark poetry of statement.” The result, her translators suggest, “is an emotionally-charged simplicity and an enhanced focus on lyrical narrative and portraiture.” The emotional range is wide in this poetry, “from savage sarcasm, self-deprecating humor, and pointed irony to restrained pathos and prickly ambivalence.”

**The Marginalized and Dispossessed** The early poems of Ravikovitch are filled with sorrow, grief, and feelings of loss. But once her voice took on a political tone, she focused on the themes of death, brutality, and violence. An article in *The Progressive* notes that the themes Ravikovitch explored include “the parallels between the plight of the Palestinians, the suffering of Jews in the Diaspora, and the constraints on women in traditional Jewish society.” Bloch and Kronfeld add that besides her political themes and themes on the human condition, “many poems explore questions of ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics.”

### Works in Critical Context

In the introduction to a 1995 collection of Israeli war poetry, *No Rattling of Sabers*—in which Ravikovitch’s poems are included—editor Esther Raizen writes that anthologies of translated Hebrew poetry “often tend to minimize the inclusion of political poems, considered by many to be an inferior branch of the art.” This is because, Raizen explains, their social messages eclipse the artistic value of the poems. “Because their work is popular with the general public,” Raizen continues, “and possibly because many of their poems were set to music, as is very often the case with war poetry or poetry of protest, these writers have been frequently referred to in Israeli literary circles as ‘versifiers,’ in an apparent attempt to distinguish them from ‘real’ poets.” Raizen adds, however, that political poetry is nevertheless a “legitimate, compelling manifestation of human experience.”

**Beloved Israeli Voice** From Ravikovitch’s first published work, *The Love of an Orange* (1959), critics were praising not only her content but her style and aesthetic power. As Haaretz writer Dalia Karpel reports, critics such as the demanding Baruch Kurzweil determined Ravikovitch’s poems “bear the seal of originality.” Ravikovitch scholars Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld also assert that she was a “much-beloved poet, widely honored for her artistry and her courage, [who] enjoyed canonical stature from the beginning of her career and was considered a cultural icon in Israel.”

In 1998 Ravikovitch was awarded the Israel Prize (1998), the country’s highest honor. The judges’ accompanying speech noted, “Her poetic style is distinguished by its skillful synthesis of a rich literary language with the colloquial idiom, and of her personal outcry with that of the collective. This has made her the most important—indeed the most distinctive—Hebrew poet of our time. She is the central pillar of Hebrew lyric poetry.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Using the library and the Internet, research Israeli life, including the culture, religion, government and politics, education, and worldviews. Select one or more of Ravikovitch’s poems and find evidence of

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In much of her poetic work, Ravikovitch expresses her explicit political views. Here are a few works by writers who also wrote on war, politics, and other themes dedicated to their community fellows and homeland:

*Collected Later Poems* (2003), by Anthony Hecht. In this collection of three volumes of poetry, Hecht’s experiences as a World War II liberator who witnessed the atrocities firsthand take on intense focus and profound sentiment.

*Days to Remember* (1970), a nonfiction narrative by Carlos Monsivais. This work by a leading political journalist and cultural critic chronicles the 1968 student movement in Mexico against the gross social and political injustices.

*Dien Cai Dau* (1988), poetry by Yusef Komunyakaa. The poet chronicles his experiences as a Vietnam War journalist in this collection, which includes the much-anthologized “Facing It.”

*Heart Mountain* (1989), a novel by Gretel Ehrlich. The story focuses on the experiences of Japanese-Americans interned in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming prison camp during World War II.

*Three Days and a Child* (1970), stories by A. B. Yehoshua. In this work, the author considers contemporary Israel, providing social commentary on present and past generations.

this culture in the text. Discuss your understanding of Israeli culture as it is described by Ravikovitch.

2. Create a timeline of major events in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some events to include would be the British Mandate of Palestine, the formation of Israel, and the Arab-Israeli War. After creating the timeline, write a brief essay explaining how one or more of these events is reflected in the works of Ravikovitch.
3. In *No Rattling of Sabers: An Anthology of Israeli War Poetry* (1995), Esther Raizen writes that people need to “express themselves in the medium of poetry, an inclination that seems to grow at times of national strife.” Consider a Ravikovitch poem that expresses emotions and sensibilities “associated with a virtually permanent state of war.” What attitude does she make readers aware of through her imagery? What words does she use to reveal her attitude toward war?
4. Esther Raizen further discusses the duality of the Israeli citizen during wartime: “Determination to survive, and live by the sword if need be, and going to battle against one’s will have always co-existed in the Israeli psyche.” Consider one of Ravikovitch’s

political poems and look for this duality. How is the speaker pro-war or in favor of patriotism, defending the Israeli cause? How is the speaker antiwar or against having to fight against his or her will?

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## ■ Erich Paul Remark

SEE *Erich Maria Remarque*

## ■ Erich Maria Remarque

BORN: 1898, Osnabrück, Germany

DIED: 1970, Locarno, Switzerland

NATIONALITY: German American

GENRE: Novels, plays

MAJOR WORKS:

- The Dream Room* (1920)  
*All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929)  
*Three Comrades* (1937)  
*Flotsam* (1946)  
*Arch of Triumph* (1952)

### Overview

German author Erich Maria Remarque was a popular novelist whose *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) was the most successful German best seller on the subject of the soldier's life in World War I. Though his later antiwar novels, especially the 1952 novel *Arch of Triumph*, won high praise from critics, it is for *All Quiet on the Western Front* that he is best remembered.



Erich Maria Remarque Remarque, Erich Maria, photograph. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Interest in Writing, Teaching** Erich Maria Remarque was born Erich Paul Remark on July 22, 1898, in Osnabrück, Germany, to bookbinder Peter Franz and mother Anna Maria Remark. But by age sixteen he was well into writing; he composed poems, essays, and the beginnings of a novel he would later complete and publish. Educated in Catholic schools, he was not admitted to college-preparatory courses such as those attended by upper-middle-class youths. Instead, he took courses that would allow him to enter a Catholic teachers' training college. There he went unchallenged academically, and so he read voraciously on his own, eventually studying further at the University of Münster.

**Personal Losses During World War I** In 1916, in the midst of World War I, the eighteen-year-old was drafted into the German army. Because his mother was seriously ill, he was given frequent leaves to be at her side and was not posted to France until the summer of 1917. Though he was in the army for three years and was often close to the front, he never actually fought. In July 1917, one of his comrades was injured by shell fragments and Remarque carried the man back to safety. Despite these efforts, his friend died, making for one of many personal experiences that he would later incorporate into his works, such as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Not long afterward, when Remarque himself was wounded in three places by shrapnel from long-range artillery shells, he spent most of the rest of the war reeling from the death of his mother in 1918 and recuperating from his wounds in a Duisburg hospital, until he was deemed fit to return to active duty on October 31, 1918. With the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, he was never posted near the front again.

It was during this enforced convalescence that the persona of Erich Maria Remarque appeared from that of Erich Paul Remark. The author changed both his middle name and the spelling of his last name, taking "Maria" from his mother and the spelling of his last name from that of his French ancestors.

**Postwar Years and Pacifism** Remarque developed a vision of himself as the outsider and a pacifist, a difficult role in German society, and his soldier's disillusionment with the politicians who had allowed the war to happen became a common theme in his diaries of the period. Also upon his return to Osnabrück, Remarque began exhibiting what friends thought to be odd behavior. Discharged from the army as a private, he nonetheless took to parading the streets of his hometown in the uniform of a lieutenant, bedecked with war medals including the Iron Cross. Though he claimed the latter was awarded to him for carrying his wounded friend to safety, it is unclear whether or not he actually was awarded the

medal. In fact, he felt guilty about not fighting in the war, even though he had been near the front so often.

By 1919, he was back in the Catholic Seminary for Teachers, preparing for an education career. Working as a substitute teacher in several small towns around Osnabrück, he managed to antagonize administrators with his loner attitude and lack of cooperation. He was also falsely accused—according to his diaries—of involvement in a left-wing, pro-Bolshevik revolutionary movement called the Spartacists and finally decided that a career in education was not for him.

After working as a substitute teacher in and around Osnabrück, Germany, for the next several years he worked at various jobs, including as a peddler, a clerk, a gravestone salesman, a stonemason, an organist in an asylum for the mentally ill, a press reader, a test driver for a Berlin tire company, a drama critic, and an advertising copywriter for an automobile company. It was in this last position that he began to refine his writing skills. By 1925, he was working in Berlin as editor of the magazine *Sport im Bild*. It was also during this period that he earned his reputation for loving fast cars and hard living; he married the actress Jutta Zambona and started his literary career with publication of the car-racing story "Stations on the Horizon." Within two years he became a controversial but best-selling author in Germany, with *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

**Reviled in Germany, Hailed Elsewhere** Initially, he could find no publisher for his book, so it came out first in serial form in 1928. But when Ullstein Publishers brought it out in early 1929 as a book, it was an instant success, and it sold more than half a million copies in just three months. Remarque won international fame and fortune, but he was reviled in his native Germany for the book's pacifist sentiments. Nevertheless, foreign-language editions soon appeared—twenty-five in all—and by 1931, worldwide sales totaled 3.5 million copies. Ullstein boosted the phenomenal sales with a promotional campaign that was quite unusual for the staid publishing world in the 1920s, and the book has remained in print and has continued to sell for more than seventy years, inspiring three film versions and influencing several generations of young men and women who were faced with the prospect of going to war.

Remarque would later land in the middle of a political battle, despite the book's huge sales in Germany. When the Nazis came to power in 1939, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* was one of the books publicly burned by the new regime. German critics also attempted to prove that Remarque was exaggerating his own war experience and misrepresenting the realities of World War I. To this day in Germany, Remarque's writing is not considered worthy of serious study.

**A Move to Switzerland** In 1930, the same year Remarque and his first wife divorced, he finished a sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. *The Road Back*

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Remarque's famous contemporaries include:

**Cole Porter** (1891–1964): Prolific American composer of many jazz standards.

**Sir Winston Churchill** (1874–1975): Twice prime minister of the United Kingdom, this statesman and acclaimed orator was also a Nobel prize-winning author.

**Ernest Hemingway** (1899–1961): Famous American writer associated with the post–World War I flowering of the arts in Paris.

**Golda Meir** (1898–1978): Fourth prime minister of Israel. She was one of the signatories of the Israeli declaration of independence in 1948.

recounts the trials and tribulations of soldiers trying to readjust to life in the civilian world. Once again, he hit the pulse of the times and the book sold well. But the premier of the film version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* that same year brought protests in Germany, and as a result, Remarque began spending more time in Switzerland where he had purchased a villa near Lago Maggiore and where, by the end of 1933, he and his former wife—whom he would remarry in 1938—would move.

The third and final installment of what became his World War I trilogy, *Three Comrades*, was published in 1937. Critics like *Saturday Review*'s Bernard DeVoto were favorably comparing Remarque to Ernest Hemingway, noting that he had “an ability to make the commonplaces evoke the profoundest emotion, to focus immensities through the smallest and simplest details.”

**German Citizenship Revoked, Remarque Moves to United States** In 1938, the Nazis revoked Remarque's German citizenship, and he became stateless. Partly through the personal intercession of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Remarque was allowed to enter the United States the following year, where he lived and worked in Hollywood until 1942. There, he became a celebrity, maintaining a gossip-column relationship with Marlene Dietrich, another high-profile German expatriate, and associating with celebrities of the day, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, who wrote the screenplay for the film version of *Three Comrades* and for whom Remarque wrote the screenplay version of *The Last Tycoon*.

After publishing his fourth novel, *Flotsam*, while he was living on the West Coast, Remarque moved to New York in 1943—the same year his sister Elfriede was executed by the Nazis for her part in the White Rose resistance group. There, in the city, he began painting, exhibiting his work in New York galleries, and working

on a fifth book, *Arch of Triumph*. It was an instant best seller and, according to scholars and critics like Hoffmann, is a novel worthy of the author of *All Quiet on the Western Front* with a protagonist who became “the most complex, least one-dimensional hero that Remarque had created to this point.”

**Naturalization and a New War** Remarque became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1947, thereafter dividing his time between his adopted country and Switzerland. By the end of World War II, he was again detailing the costs of war, with two more books, *Spark of Life*, which describes life in the concentration camps, and *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, a novel about a soldier who falls in love while on leave from the Russian front toward the end of World War II and who dies on the battlefield upon his return to the front.

Remarque and Jutta Zambona divorced for the second time in 1957. In 1958 Remarque married film actress Paulette Goddard. By that time, he had completed and published his last novel, *The Night in Lisbon* (1964), which reviewers praised highly for its compelling story of those who fled Nazi persecution. He was at work on another book, *Shadows in Paradise*, when he died in a hospital in Locarno, Switzerland, on September 25, 1970.

### Works in Literary Context

With his most famous work, Remarque stated a theme that would recur throughout all of his writing: the dislocations caused by the political and military events of the turbulent twentieth century for young men of a lost generation that had lost not only its youth but also its connection to society as a whole.

**Influences** Remarque read extensively, from works of Goethe, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche to those of Hesse, Mann, and Proust. Though he began his career during the height of the modernist movement in art and literature, his writing was largely conventional in form. His books are well-crafted novels with clear plotlines; they are easy to read; and they mix adventure, suspense, social comment, and some violence with a central love story. They were mostly popular during his lifetime, but only *All Quiet on the Western Front* has garnered lasting attention.

**World War I and the Lost Generation** What ensured this particular book's lasting place in literary history was Remarque's ability to create a clear and compelling document of a pivotal moment in history: World War I. Throughout most of his work, Remarque focused on the theme of dislocation and disillusion brought on by the turbulent events of the first half of the twentieth century and the fate of the so-called lost generation—those whose lives were torn apart by World War I. These themes continue to resonate with readers around the world, for whom *All Quiet on the Western Front* remains the preeminent World War I novel.

Remarque was one of the few German writers whose works about World War I and its aftermath came to the attention of non-German readers. His work takes its place among many American and European novels, poems, films, and plays that focus on the horrors of World War I and the difficulties faced by its survivors. Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), and W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944) are other prominent novels that explore the war and its toll.

### Works in Critical Context

Though most of his books were well received in his lifetime, Remarque's literary reputation today rests almost entirely on *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

***All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929)** Writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, Frank Ernest Hill noted that *All Quiet on the Western Front* "will give any sensitive reader a terrific impact," while Joseph Wood Krutch observed in the *Nation* that "Remarque tells his plain tale with a sort of naïvete which is the result not of too little experience but of too much." Henry Seidel Canby, in the *Saturday Review*, called *All Quiet on the Western Front* "the greatest book about the war that I have seen," and in England, Herbert Read of the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* termed it "the greatest of all war books." Indeed, the critical consensus was, and continues to be, that *All Quiet on the Western Front* ranks among the very best war novels of all time.

### Responses to Literature

1. While reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, consider the military technology of the war, and make note of the way the author describes it. Using your library and the Internet, find out about the military technology of today, and write a paper comparing the two.
2. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, what is Paul Bäumer's personality like when he enters the war? How does the war experience change him?
3. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about conscientious objectors to World War I in the United States and Europe. Write a paper summarizing your findings.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers and directors who also take a strong anti-war stance:

*Lay Down Your Arms!* (1889), a novel by Bertha von Suttner. An antiwar novel that prompted the author's becoming a reputed pacifist leader.

*The Good Soldier Svejk* (1923), a novel by Jaroslav Hasek. An unfinished, illustrated satire of a precipitated World War I.

*A Farewell to Arms* (1929), a novel by Ernest Hemingway. The story of Italian-front ambulance driver Frederick Henry's experiences during World War I.

*Gallipoli* (1981), a film directed by Peter Weir. Set during World War I, this film follows the paths of two young Australian men (one played by a young Mel Gibson) as they set off to fight with the Allied troops in Turkey.

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## Mary Renault

BORN: 1905, London, England

DIED: 1983, Cape Town, South Africa

NATIONALITY: British, South African

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Return to Night* (1947)

*The North Face* (1948)

*The Mask of Apollo* (1966)

*Fire from Heaven* (1969)

*The Praise Singer* (1978)

### Overview

British writer Mary Challans achieved great success as a writer of historical novels. Using the pen name of Mary Renault, she explored such figures as Dion of Syracuse (408–354 B.C.E.) and such events as the Great War between Athens and Sparta. She is regarded as one of the foremost historical novelists of her time.



Mary Renault © Bettmann / CORBIS

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Youth Clouded by Parents' Unhappy Marriage**  
Mary Challans, whom the world would come to know as author Mary Renault, was born on September 4, 1905, in London, England, to Dr. Frank Challans and his wife, Clementine Mary (née Baxter). Though she had an unhappy childhood because of her parents' unhappy marriage, she found solace in literature. Renault was introduced to influential Victorian and Edwardian titles while a student first at Romford House School in London and later at Cliftons Girls' School in Bristol. During her school years, World War I was fought. Beginning over territory in the Balkans and encompassing much of Europe because of entangling alliances, the war saw the loss of millions of lives, including much of a generation of young men in Great Britain.

**Trained as Nurse** Renault studied languages, mythology, philosophy, and history at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, then an all-women's college. She graduated with a BA in English in 1928. Renault had decided at an early age that she wanted to be a writer. Because she felt that a writer must participate actively in life and because she did not want to follow the traditional professional path of becoming a teacher, she enrolled in a nursing school in 1937.

She took her nurse's training at Oxford's Radcliffe Infirmary. There, she met the woman who would become her life-long partner, Julie Mullard. At the time, lesbian-

ism was not socially acceptable in Great Britain, but women could often live together as companions without arousing much suspicion. However, Britain did legally regulate lesbian behavior with a Criminal Law Amendment Act, passed in 1922, which established a minimum age for sexual activities between females.

**First Success** Renault took a post in the infirmary's brain surgery ward after completing her education. Her experiences as a nurse provided material for her first novel, *Promise of Love*, which she wrote under her pen name. It was published in 1939 under the title *Purposes of Love*, and was well received by the critics.

**Nurse During World War II** Buoyed by the success of her first novel, Renault decided to become a full-time writer, but World War II intervened. While the war was primarily fought on the European continent during its early days, Great Britain was nonetheless deeply affected by the conflict. As Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, took over more and more territory in Europe, many refugees and people seeking exile came to Great Britain. Britain also faced aerial assaults from the Germans, including the so-called Blitz on Britain in 1940 and 1941, resulting in much damage.

Thousands of British women worked as nurses during the war, and Renault was no exception. She continued her nursing career at Winford Emergency Hospital in Bristol and wrote in her spare time. Her second novel, *Return to Night* (1947), appeared after the war and brought her name to the attention of the American reading public when it received the \$150,000 MGM prize, the largest financial award in the field of literature.

**Move to South Africa** Following the end of the war, Renault and Mullard moved to South Africa, where they lived for the rest of their lives. As scholar Linda Proud explains, the couple had found in South Africa a circle of fellow gay expatriates who had "escaped the repressive attitudes toward homosexuality in Britain," and they found a place where they could live together without "causing the outrage they had sometimes provoked at home."

**Historical Novels** After World War II, Renault and Mullard also traveled extensively in France, Italy, Greece, and the Aegean Islands. Renault was most impressed with Greece, and it became the setting for many of her historical novels, including her first historical novel, *The Last of the Wine* (1956). The work earned her much critical praise. Her next two historical novels, *The King Must Die* (1958) and its sequel, *The Bull from the Sea* (1962), also earned accolades from critics.

Renault continued with Greek settings and themes in her last four historical novels—*The Mask of Apollo* (1966) and a trilogy comprising *Fire from Heaven* (1969), *The Persian Boy* (1972), and *Funeral Games* (1978). On December 13, 1983, Mary Renault Challans died at her Cape Town home.

## Works in Literary Context

As a historical novelist, Renault's gift lay in her ability to blend fact with fiction, making the reader guess which details are fictitious. Many of her works are historically based, and she especially favored Greece as a setting. Legendary figures are also employed by Renault to great effect.

**Influential Power of History** In the author's note to *The Mask of Apollo* (1966), Renault writes, "The perpetual stream of human nature is formed into ever-changing shallows, eddies, falls and pools by the land over which it passes. Perhaps the only real value of history lies in considering this endlessly varied play between the essence and the accidents." This "endlessly varied play" is a source of fascination to Renault. In her portrayal of the men of antiquity, she is alive to essential, in-dwelling qualities and to "accidents" by concerning her writing with the circumstances, conditions, and limitations which are peculiar to any life.

**Greece as Setting** Renault's fictional country is immediately recognizable, and her later works show an intimate understanding of classical and Hellenistic Greece. *The Last of the Wine* (1956) is set in Attica during the Peloponnesian War, and *The Mask of Apollo* is set in Greece and Sicily during the fourth century B.C.E. *The Praise Singer* (1978) takes place in Keos, Samos, Athens, and Sicily in the sixth century B.C.E.

**Historical Characters and Related Themes** Renault explores the legendary history of Theseus in *The King Must Die* (1958) and *The Bull from the Sea* (1962). *Fire from Heaven*, *The Persian Boy*, and *Funeral Games* testify to Renault's enduring preoccupation with Alexander the Great. In the author's notes to *The Persian Boy*, she explains her fascination, saying, "No other human being has attracted in his lifetime, from so many men, so fervent a devotion. Their reasons are worth examining."

This devotion translates well to Renault's themes: the love of man and man; the clash between justice and expediency; and the power of art—these are concerns that stamp her work. In her earlier novels, it was especially important to Renault to explore the ambiguities or complications of gender identification, whereas in her later novels, she examines the challenges of homosexuality. In *The Charioteer* (1953), for example, the author pursues the efforts of the main character to come to terms with his orientation toward men. An obituary writer for the London *Times* determined that Renault treated such themes "sympathetically, even aggressively—almost as a panacea for the world's ills."

## Works in Critical Context

Critics have generally embraced Renault as a writer, respecting her historical novels as a blend of fact and fiction. She was praised for her skill in portraying an

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Renault's famous contemporaries include:

**Victor Borge** (1909–2000): Danish humorist and musician who earned such nicknames for his talent as "The Clown Prince of Denmark."

**William S. Burroughs** (1914–1997): The American avant-garde writer who is known as one of the central members of the Beat generation.

**Barry Goldwater** (1909–1998): The politician was a five-term U.S. senator and the 1964 Republican Party presidential nominee.

**Doris Lessing** (1919–): English author who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007.

**Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973): Communist Chilean poet who stirred up much controversy when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1971.

individual's inner thoughts and depicting period detail, as well as their fast pace and accurate detail. In her recreations of the past, Renault is regarded highly for her insights into human character while creating a compelling narrative.

**Promise of Love** Renault's early works were well received by critics, starting with her first novel, *Promise of Love* (1939). A reviewer for the *New York Times* stated, "On a double count *Promise of Love* strikes me as an unusually excellent first novel. There is a fusion between background and personal drama, between inner and outer reality, which enriches and dignifies both. The story of Mic and Vivian would not be nearly so arresting as it is if one were not so sharply aware of the pressure of their environment.... When one adds to this that Mary Renault's style has a sure, fluid quality, that she possesses humor as well as sensitiveness, that even her minor characters are shrewdly drawn—the sum total is quite impressive."

**Return to Night** Echoing the enthusiasm of many other critics, a *New Yorker* reviewer described her fourth novel, *Return to Night* (1947), as "an expert, vivid novel," explaining that "Miss Renault sets forth the characters of three extremely complex people with a penetrating lucidity and a certain moderate reasonableness, making this not just an impassioned love story but a novel of considerable depth."

**The Last of the Wine** Renault also provided through her works a challenge for critics and scholars—to appreciate and then to discern where her historical novels are fact-based and where they are fictional. "To read *The Last of the Wine*," wrote a critic in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, "is to walk for a while in the shadow of the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who also concerned themselves with themes of homosexuality or gender identity through history:

*Forbidden Love: A Harrowing True Story of Love and Revenge in Jordan* (2003), a novel by Norma Khouri. In this book, touted as nonfiction but which was actually fiction, an Arabian Muslim woman falls in love with a Catholic man, and the consequences are dire.

*Giovanni's Room* (1956), a novella by James Baldwin. In this story, the author explores through his main characters David and Giovanni such socially controversial themes as homosexuality, homophobia, and misogyny.

*Measuring the World* (2007), a novel by Daniel Kehlman. In this wry historical fiction, two scientific geniuses come together by accident and share some repressed moments in between sharing their discoveries.

*Rubyfruit Jungle* (1980), a novel by Rita Mae Brown. In this much-acclaimed novel, Molly is a bastard child, a tomboy, and a young woman who falls in love with another woman.

Acropolis with Plato and his friends.” Observed the *Times Literary Supplement*: “*The Last of the Wine* is a superb historical novel. The writing is Attic in quality, unforced, clear, delicate. The characterization is uniformly successful and, most difficult of all, the atmosphere of Athens is realized in masterly fashion. Miss Renault is not only obviously familiar with the principal sources. She has disciplined her imagination so that the reader ceases to question the authenticity of her fiction.”

### Responses to Literature

1. Some scholars have suggested that Renault’s novels interpret history from a feminist perspective. Consider one or more of the author’s works in this context, and set up a debate. Determine whether you think Renault’s novels are feminist. Be sure to defend your position with textual examples by citing lines or passages.
2. *The King Must Die* is a historical novel. It is also classified as a Bildungsroman—a building novel, or novel of personal development and growth. Find textual examples that support the notion that the novel is indeed a Bildungsroman.
3. Search the Internet and research some facts about Alexander the Great. What facts are included in Renault’s book *Fire from Heaven?* Discuss why Alexander would make a worthy character in a historical novel.

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## Samuel Richardson

BORN: 1689, Mackworth, Derbyshire, England

DIED: 1761, London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Novel

MAJOR WORKS:

*Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740)

*Clarissa: or, the History of a Young Lady* (1747)

*The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753)



Samuel Richardson Hulton Archive / Getty Images

## Overview

Samuel Richardson took familiar romance structures of courtship and gave them a massive new force, direction, and complexity. He is considered the originator of the modern English novel and has also been called the first dramatic novelist as well as the first of the eighteenth-century “sentimental” writers. He introduced tragedy to the novel form and substituted social embarrassment for tragic conflict, thus developing the first novel of manners. Most significantly, Richardson’s detailed exploration of his characters’ motives and feelings, accomplished through his use of the epistolary method—where the narrative is conveyed through letters written by one or more characters—added a new dimension to the art of fiction.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Successful Printer** Little is known of Richardson’s early life. He was born in Derbyshire in 1689, the son of a woodworker and his wife. Though his parents had hoped to educate him in the ministry, poverty forced them to abandon such hopes. He received a modest education and was apprenticed to a printer and soon became a freeman.

In 1715 Richardson set up his own business and quickly became one of the leading merchants in London. Through his business, he became a friend and patron of many writers, including Samuel Johnson, Sarah Fielding, and Edward Young. In 1721 he married Martha Wilde, the daughter of his former printing master. His industriousness paid off quickly, and his income and influence rose steadily.

As a printer, his output included works and journals by a number of conservative Tory authors and eventually he became the official printer for the House of Commons. This important commission made Richardson wealthy and professionally secure, and it taught him a great deal about aspects of aristocratic and political life that would become useful in his later novels.

In the eighteenth century, printers were in the center of social transformation: Publications of all sorts were becoming mass-produced and inexpensive enough to reach wide audiences. Consequently, there was a sharp increase in public education and literacy rates. The printing press became an important engine for the emerging Enlightenment throughout Europe. Richardson advocated for useful publications rather than just waiting for business to come to him, and it is not surprising that he became the printer for the Society for the Encouragement of Learning.

**Personal Tragedies** Richardson’s greatest prosperity occurred during the 1730s, but this was also a desolate time, shaping his religious and personal outlook on life. He was married twice, in 1721 and 1732. All six children from his first marriage died by the age of four. Two other children born to his second wife also died in infancy; four daughters survived. During this decade, Richardson also lost his father in an accident along with two brothers and a close friend.

Richardson became ill, suffering from digestive afflictions, nervousness, and dizziness. Based on modern medical knowledge, it appears that Richardson had Parkinson’s disease. He was so shaky that sometimes he could walk only with a cane, but he continued with tremendous energy to build up his printing business and in late middle age was to take on an exhausting second career as a writer.

**From Letter Writing to Novelist** At the age of fifty-one, Richardson began writing what would become his first novel, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740). This work was the result of a commission he undertook at the request of two booksellers, Charles Rivington and John Osborn. Both Rivington and Osborn felt that a collection of model letters to be used by people with little formal education would be a prosperous venture, and they proposed the idea to Richardson, who enthusiastically accepted. Two years later the volume was published.

While he was writing this work, Richardson elaborated on a story he had heard about the attempted seduction of a young servant girl by her aristocratic

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Richardson's famous contemporaries include:

**Thomas Chippendale** (1718–1779): British furniture designer whose name became synonymous with the most valued home artifacts of his era and whose works are still highly sought after today.

**Carlo Osvaldo Goldoni** (1707–1793): Playwright and librettist from Venice who wrote many of Italy's best-loved plays. He captured the emerging middle class of his time in the colorful and witty Venetian dialect.

**Queen Anne** (1665–1714): British queen who took the throne in 1702; she became the first monarch to reign over Great Britain when England and Scotland united as a single nation in 1707.

**Frances Moore Brooke** (1724–1789): A prolific English novelist, playwright, essayist, and poet who traveled with her husband to Canada. Her novel *The History of Emily Montague* is said to be the first novel written in North America.

**Tobias Smollett** (1721–1771): Scottish novelist best known for his comic novels *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748), *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1753), and *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771).

master. She held her ground, and the master was so impressed with her virtue that he fell in love with her and proposed an honest marriage. The result was *Pamela*, and Richardson began his career as a novelist. *Pamela* was a huge success and became the best-selling novel in Britain and created a sensation throughout Europe.

**Another Epistolary Novel, Another Tragic Heroine** Richardson extended the novel with a sequel volume in 1741 but fell ill again in 1742. Few outside his close circle of friends knew that he was writing a new novel that would dwarf *Pamela* in size, popularity, and literary influence. Richardson tested some of his ideas in a remarkable series of letters with his friends, many of them women, but he remained stubborn about the controversial tragic plan of his masterwork. The first volumes of *Clarissa* appeared in 1747, the last ones in 1748, and substantially different second and third editions were complete by 1751.

*Clarissa* is remarkable for many reasons, one of the most important of which is the way it established the emerging genre of the novel as a vehicle for psychological insight that can be read on many levels. On one level, it is a somber indictment of bourgeois materialism and family tyranny, as well as an attack on the aristocratic notion of class supremacy. Both the bourgeois Harlowes and the aristocratic Lovelace suffer because they fail to realize the

most important values in life. It is also a revealing portrait of a consciousness doomed to enact its life under the continuous threat of destruction. Clarissa's death is a direct result of those qualities that both the characters in the novel and the reader consider saintly—namely, her purity of body and soul. Clarissa's ultimate moral strength resides in her refusal to compromise these qualities to the physical world of violence, materialism, and sin. Instead, she chooses negation and death as her final salvation.

Structurally, *Clarissa* represents a significant advance over *Pamela*. Although Richardson utilizes the epistolary method once again, he also uses three other points of view—Anna Howe's, Lovelace's, and Belford's—to explore the various implications of the novel's events.

**A Virtuous Male Hero** Richardson began his third novel, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, around 1750. The story is about how a good man, in love with two deserving women, balances questions of loyalty and honor. Richardson also addresses several social issues of the time relating to changing concepts of male virtue, including the ethics of dueling and the nature of masculine sentimentality. While also popular in the period—Jane Austen said it was her favorite novel—literary history has not valued *Sir Charles Grandison* as much as *Pamela* or *Clarissa*, mainly because of its lack of a compelling dramatic situation and psychologically complex characters.

Richardson's health continued to decline, with an increase of trembling and dizziness. By the end of 1755, Richardson's health forced him to give up writing, and he suffered a stroke on June 28, 1761. He died on July 4 and was buried in St. Bride's Church beside his first wife and children.

### Works in Literary Context

Richardson builds upon the existing genre of the romance—love stories often featuring forced marriages, abductions, and sometimes rape. But in *Clarissa* especially, Richardson replaces the idealism of the romance with both the realism of interpersonal relationships and near-perfect Christian virtue. Clarissa and Lovelace are among the very first modern fictional characters with a full capacity for change and self-analysis. Clarissa and Pamela are among the first characters in English fiction who develop slowly, rather than changing suddenly due to an altering experience.

**The Longest Novel in English** *Clarissa* is the longest novel in English—a fact loved by some readers, tolerated by most, and mocked by others. Like the works of James Joyce and Marcel Proust, *Clarissa* is meant for those who like reading, and it also is a work that demands rereading. The characters themselves reread, both metaphorically and literally, their own experiences, which is made vivid for the novel's readers at each point it occurs.

Angus Wilson says of the pace of the work, “The journey before the reader will be, for three quarters of the book... drawn out and long, but what he is reading at any given moment is sharply felt and quick.”

**Class Struggles** The plots of Richardson’s novels demonstrate the engagement of literature and culture in the middle of the eighteenth century. Richardson is unique among the many early novelists who build their romance plots around themes of class struggle. The struggle of gender stereotypes in *Pamela* and *Clarissa* serve as a parallel to the class struggles of the middle class asserting its emerging powers against the manipulations of the old aristocratic order.

*Pamela*, a servant girl, converts the decadent Mr. B. to her more Puritanical strain of working-class virtue. *Clarissa* exhibits the new conflict between the middle-class gentry, rising by colonial trade and coal mining, and the old nobility. While Lovelace represents the worst abuses of aristocratic power, the Harlowe family represents the vulgarity and selfish materialism of the rising middle class. Only the hero and the heroine transcend the limitations of their class and time.

### Works in Critical Context

Richardson’s high moral tone was appealing to Victorian readers, although he was often neglected for the length of his novels and his supposedly perverse interest in the sexual persecutions of vulnerable young women. By the early twentieth century, he was largely neglected, but in 1957, Ian Watt’s influential book *The Rise of the Novel* helped restore the reputation of Richardson’s novels with an enthusiastic appreciation of their realism and form. More recently, feminist and cultural critics have found a limitless resource in Richardson’s works with their subtle explorations of emerging and shifting feminine identities and the ways in which sexual dynamics play themselves out in the context of politics, class, and representation.

**Pamela** *Pamela* was the first novel to become a cultural sensation. Scenes from *Pamela* appeared on fans, ceramic plates, and even in a wax museum. One town rang the church bells when the final volume of *Pamela* arrived to celebrate the main character’s marriage.

It should be noted that Richardson’s reception history is bound up in a tight knot with Henry Fielding’s. Fielding wrote a parody of *Pamela* called *Shamela*, mocking what he saw as the heroine’s moral hypocrisy. Fielding’s much more ambitious novel *Joseph Andrews* also begins as a parody of *Pamela*, and the title character is supposedly her brother. While Fielding did have some kind things to say about *Clarissa*, and Richardson helped to finance a trip to Lisbon that Fielding took for his health, the two spent most of their writing careers in a bitter public rivalry.

**Clarissa** *Clarissa* earned immediate and lasting respect throughout Europe, sometimes bringing readers

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Epistolary novels have a unique relationship with their readers. Without a narrator, characters speak for themselves, often describing events as they are occurring, and the reader is left to decide which of the competing viewpoints is best. Other works that use the epistolary method include:

*The Color Purple* (1983), a novel by Alice Walker. This work implements a modern take on the epistolary novel. Set in 1930s Georgia, Walker addresses the challenges, injustices, and triumphs that African American women faced in pre-civil rights America.

*Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*) (1782), a novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos. Directly influenced by *Clarissa*, Laclos created a novel of letters between the vain libertine Valmont and his partner/competitor, the Marquise de Mereuil, as they plot the sexual conquest and humiliation of several prominent and innocent young women.

*Dracula* (1897), a novel by Bram Stoker. This Gothic vampire story uses journal entries, letters, newspaper clippings, a ship’s log, and phonograph recordings to advance the narrative.

such as Denis Diderot to say in a eulogy for Richardson, “O Richardson! ... Who is it who will dare to wrest away one line from your sublime works? ... Centuries, make haste to run and bring with you the honors which are due to Richardson!” *Clarissa* was popular in England, but it was remarkably so in France and Germany, where many imitations and influenced novels were produced well into the nineteenth century, including Laclos’s *Dangerous Liaisons*.

*Clarissa* has also attracted many postmodern critics, fascinated by the ways in which Richardson uses the epistolary form to push the boundaries of what the novel can and cannot do—throughout Richardson’s long novels, almost everything that can happen to letters happens: They are hidden, burned, forged, exchanged, stolen, and even sewn into the fabric of clothes. Characters are sometimes quite literally literary, writing themselves into power and existence, even after death.

### Responses to Literature

1. What are the pros and cons of extraordinary length in a novel like *Clarissa*? What is potentially gained and lost?
2. Read Richardson’s powerful preface to *Clarissa*. Discuss Richardson’s theory of the novel, and explain what his moral purpose is for his readers. What still seems relevant to readers of *Clarissa* today?

3. Using library resources and the Internet, research the important ideas and advancements during the Enlightenment. What are some of the era's attitudes that are prevalent in Richardson's novels?

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## Mordecai Richler

BORN: 1931, Montreal, Canada

DIED: 2001, Montreal, Canada

NATIONALITY: Canadian

GENRE: Drama, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955)

*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959)



Mordecai Richler *Richler, Mordecai, photograph*. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

- The Incomparable Atuk* (1963)  
*Solomon Gursky Was Here* (1989)  
*Jacob Two-Two's First Spy Case* (1995)

#### Overview

Among the most prominent figures in contemporary Canadian literature, Richler is best known for the darkly humorous novels in which he examines such topics as Canadian society, Jewish culture, the adverse effects of materialism, and relationships between individuals of different backgrounds. Richler left Canada at the age of twenty and lived in Europe for more than twenty years; he usually set his fiction in the Jewish section of Montreal where he was raised, or in European locales. And indeed, it is surely no mistake that in a Europe longing to be reminded of the world before the massive cultural and physical trauma of the Holocaust and of World War II, Richler felt himself compelled to look back to his Jewish roots in Montreal. Although Richler is sometimes faulted for excessive vulgarity and for being overly judgmental of both Canadian nationalism and Jewish culture, he is widely praised for his sense of humor and his skill at blending realism and satire.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Jewish Montreal and Cosmopolitan Europe** Mordecai Richler was born in the Jewish ghetto of Montreal to a religious family of Russian émigrés in 1931. After a stint at a university, Richler cashed in an insurance policy and used the money to sail to Liverpool, England. Eventually he found his way to Paris, where he spent some years emulating such expatriate authors as Ernest Hemingway and Henry Miller, and later moved to London (in 1954), where he worked as a news correspondent.

**Finding a Voice** In the same year he moved to London, Richler published his first novel, *The Acrobats*, a book he later characterized as “more political than anything I’ve done since, and humorless.” Richler himself characterized the novel as somewhat derivative. He found his own voice soon after, with novels like *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955), *A Choice of Enemies* (1957), and *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963).

**Praise for Novels that Draw on Montreal Roots** Richler gained critical acclaim with three of his best-known titles, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959), *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971), and *Joshua, Then and Now* (1980). These books share a common theme—that of a Jewish-Canadian protagonist at odds with society, a theme based loosely on Richler’s own life—and all three novels revolve around the way greed can taint success. The novels also reveal Richler’s flair for dark humor and racy content. Richler’s screenplay adaptation of *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* won him an Academy Award nomination in 1975.

**A Successful Comeback Novel** After *Joshua, Then and Now*, nine years would pass before Richler published another novel (although he was a widely published journalist throughout that period). When he broke the silence in 1989 with *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, several reviewers welcomed the novel as worth the wait, and England’s Book Trust honored it with a Commonwealth Writers Prize. In these years—between 1970 and the late 1990s—Richler also conducted a long-running sort of feud with Québécois nationalists, activists in favor of Québec’s secession from Canada and often in favor of Franco-phone-oriented language laws. Richler has described various Québécois stances as anti-Semitic, with predictably outraged reactions from a number of Québécois commentators and pundits.

**Children’s Books and Final Novel** Richler introduced his children’s book hero Jacob Two-Two (so called because, as the youngest of five children, he has to say everything twice to be heard) in 1975 with *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*. *Jacob Two-Two and the Dinosaur* appeared in 1987, and Richler rounded out this much-loved trilogy with *Jacob Two-Two’s First Spy Case* in 1995. Jacob was based on Richler’s own youngest son

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Richler’s famous contemporaries include:

**Gaston Suarez** (1929–1984): A Bolivian novelist and dramatist.

**Philip Roth** (1933–): An American novelist whose work has both been highly praised and condemned as anti-Semitic, despite the fact that Roth himself is Jewish.

**Seamus Heaney** (1939–): The Nobel Prize-winning Irish poet who translated *Beowulf* into contemporary English and received much acclaim for making the work accessible to modern readers.

**Boris Yeltsin** (1931–2007): The first president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russia), Yeltsin served from 1991 until 1999.

**Margaret Thatcher** (1925–): The first female prime minister of the United Kingdom, Thatcher served in office from 1979 until 1990.

**Martin Luther King Jr.** (1929–1968): An American civil rights leader whose efforts were critical in helping the United States begin to overcome its institutionalized racism, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

Jacob Richler. Two years later he published his last novel for adults: *Barney’s Version*. The book won that year’s Giller Prize. Richler died in 2001 of complications resulting from cancer.

## Works in Literary Context

**Full Tilt Toward Satire** Two tendencies dominate Richler’s fiction: realism and satire. The first three novels, *The Acrobats* (1954), *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955), and *A Choice of Enemies* (1957), are realistic, their plots basically traditional in form, their settings accurately detailed, and their characters motivated in psychologically familiar ways. Even in these works, as George Woodcock has noted, there is at times a drift toward satiric caricature. At the other extreme, *The Incomparable Atuk* (1963) and *Cocksure* (1968) are pure satiric fantasy along the lines of Voltaire’s long-celebrated *Candide, or Optimism* (1759), their concessions to realism slight. In them Richler indulges the strong comic vein in his writing as he attacks Canadian provincialism and the spurious gratifications of the entertainment media. Beginning with *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) and continuing in *St. Urbain’s Horseman* (1971) and in *Joshua, Then and Now* (1980), the two strands of realism and fantasy-satire come together, and this distinctive blend becomes Richler’s greatest narrative strength.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

One of the primary targets of Richler's satire was the entertainment industry. Here is a selection of other works that take aim at the entertainment world:

*For Your Consideration* (2006), a film directed by Christopher Guest. In this "mockumentary" film—a satirical, scripted film that is made to look like a documentary—the cast of the film *Home for Purim* is nominated for several awards. Ultimately, viewers understand how scheming and selfish the characters are.

*The Truman Show* (1998), a film directed by Peter Weir. The protagonist of this film, Truman, is a man whose whole life from the time of his conception onward has been the center of a reality television show. But Truman is unaware that he is being filmed and that his friends and family are actors in the drama.

*Network* (1976), a film directed by Sidney Lumet. This highly acclaimed satire demonstrates the depths to which a fictional network will sink in order to improve ratings. The film won four Academy Awards.

In these highly satirical and highly fantastical novels, Richler's work is in the same vein as his contemporaries Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon, and such later writers as David Foster Wallace.

### Works in Critical Context

Although Richler's early work received mixed critical responses—particularly his works of satire—his later work has received almost universal acclaim. Both the early and the late fiction tend to revolve around protagonists on moral quests of one sort or another. As G. David Sheps has observed, Richler's heroes "insist that salvation lies only in the adoption of personal values, but they are not sure which personal values to hold." Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here* is largely considered a deft balance between satire and realism, and the result is a highly readable and enjoyable text that does not lose any of the wit and cynicism of earlier Richler works. Nonetheless, Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* remains his best-known and most highly regarded work.

***The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*** Comparing *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* to such other coming-of-age stories as James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, A. R. Bevan, in a new introduction to Richler's novel, finds that the book, "in spite of its superficial affinity with the two novels mentioned above, ends with [none of their] affirmation." The character of Duddy, "who has never

weighed the consequences of his actions in any but material terms, is less alone in the physical sense than the earlier young men, but he is also much less of a man.... He is a modern 'anti-hero' (something like the protagonist in Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*) who lives in a largely deterministic world, a world where decisions are not decisions and where choice is not really choice." In *Modern Fiction Studies*, John Ower describes *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* as "a 'Jewish' novel [with] both a pungent ethnic flavor and the convincingness that arises when a writer deals with a milieu with which he is completely familiar." For the author, Ower continues, "the destructive psychological effects of the ghetto mentality are equalled and to some extent paralleled by those of the Jewish family. Like the society from which it springs, this tends to be close and exclusive, clinging together in spite of its intense quarrels. The best aspect of such clannishness, the feeling of kinship which transcends all personal differences, is exemplified by Duddy. Although he is in varying degrees put down and rejected by all of his relatives except his grandfather, Duddy sticks up for them and protects them."

***Solomon Gursky Was Here*** The story focuses on Moses Berger, an alcoholic Jewish writer whose life's obsession is to write a biography of the legendary Solomon Gursky. Gursky, who came from a prominent Jewish-Canadian family of liquor distillers, may have died years ago in a plane crash, but Berger finds numerous clues that suggest he lived on in various guises, a trickster and meddler in international affairs. Jumping forward and backward in time, from events in the Gursky past to the novel's present, Richler "manages to suggest a thousand-page family chronicle in not much more than 400 pages," observes Bruce Cook for Chicago's *Tribune Books*. The critic lauds the novel's humor and rich texture, concluding, "Page for page, there has not been a serious novel for years that can give as much pure pleasure as this one." Acknowledging the inventiveness of Richler's narrative, Francine Prose in the *New York Times Book Review* nonetheless found the book somewhat marred by predictable or flat characters. Other critics have suggested that there was too much going on in the novel, and that some of its humor seemed a bit too black. *Village Voice* writer Joel Yanofsky applauds the book despite its weaknesses: "If the structure of Richler's story is too elaborate at times, if the narrative loose ends aren't all pulled together, it's a small price to pay for a book this beguiling and rude, this serious, this fat and funny." And Jonathan Kirsch, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, calls it "a worthy addition" to Richler's canon, the work "of a storyteller at the height of his powers."

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *Cocksure* and watch the film *American Dreamz*. Nearly forty years passed between the publication of *Cocksure* and the release of *American*

*Dreamz*, yet their topics are very similar. In a short essay, compare the satire of each. What is each making fun of? Why? How do you react to these critiques? In what ways do they seem accurate, and in what ways do they seem exaggerated?

2. Read *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. This novel is considered a “coming-of-age” novel. Generally, in coming-of-age texts, the protagonist must battle through adversity to grow into a mature, well-balanced human being. In what ways does *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* fit this mold—for example, what adversities must be overcome? In what ways does it defy conventions?
3. After having read *Cocksure* and *The Incomparable Atuk*, you should have a good sense of how satire works. Now, write a short story or short film that is a satire of a topic on which you have a strong opinion.
4. *Solomon Gursky Was Here* is considered a kind of family saga. Writing a novel in which all the members of a family seem real—not flat and uninteresting—is very difficult. Some have argued that Richler was unsuccessful in having done that. What do you think? To what extent are his characters in the novel realistic? Support your thesis with detailed analysis of the text.

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## Rainer Maria Rilke

BORN: 1875, Prague, Bohemia

DIED: 1926, Montreux, Switzerland

NATIONALITY: German

GENRE: Fiction, poetry, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*New Poems* (1907)

*The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigg* (1910)



Rainer Maria Rilke Imagno / Getty Images

*Duino Elegies* (1923)  
*Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923)

#### Overview

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke is considered one of the greatest lyric poets of twentieth-century Germany. He is credited with creating the “thing-poem,” a form that involves describing physical objects in the most precise way possible. Because of his poetry, rich with imagery and intricate symbolism, Rilke has often been considered a mystic or prophet. In addition to poetry, Rilke wrote drama, short stories, and a largely experimental novel, *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigg*.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Unhappy Childhood and Preparation for Military Career** René Karl Wilhelm Johann Josef Maria Rilke was born in Prague on December 4, 1875, the only child of an unhappy marriage. (At the time, Prague was under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a dual monarchy ruled by Franz Joseph I, a Hapsburg.) Rilke’s father, Josef, was a retired officer in the Austrian army who worked as a railroad official at the time of his son’s birth. Sophie, Rilke’s mother, was the object of his

hatred, and Rilke blamed her for his miserable childhood, even though she was the one who encouraged him to read and write.

Expecting his son to become an army officer, Rilke's father sent him to military school when he was eleven, beginning what Rilke called "that evil and frightened decade." One year after being transferred to the military upper school in Moravia, Rilke was discharged from the academy in 1891 because of health problems that he claimed were the result of being "exhausted and abused in body and soul." He returned to Prague, where he received private instruction in preparation for university entrance exams.

**Early Published Poetry** By the time Rilke had enrolled in the philosophy program at Prague's Charles-Ferdinand University in 1895, he had already published his first volume of poetry, *Life and Songs* (1894), written in the conventional style of nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine and rejected by critics and readers alike for its naïve sentimentality. *Offering to the Lares* (1895) and *Crowned with Dreams* (1896) soon followed, but these works, too, little foreshadow the genius that would emerge several years later. In 1896, Rilke moved to Munich, where he enjoyed the literary scene, had a few plays produced, and, most importantly at the time, was introduced to the Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobson, whose work would influence Rilke throughout his career.

**Fatherland and Family** Rilke's cultural and personal experiences expanded considerably when he visited Venice in 1897. There he met the writer Lou Andreas-Salomé, who encouraged him to change his name from "René" to the more masculine "Rainer." From 1897 to 1900, Rilke traveled to Berlin, Italy, and Russia with Andreas-Salomé and her husband. In Russia, Rilke met novelist Leo Tolstoy and the peasant poet Spirdion Droschin, whose work Rilke translated into German.

Captivated by both the people and the landscape of Russia, Rilke discovered what he called his "spiritual fatherland," an indication of his transition to a mystical period of writing. During this phase, Rilke composed such collections as *Of Pilgrimage* (1901) and *The Book of Hours* (1905). Also during this time, Rilke wrote a draft of what would become the most popular work in his lifetime: *The Story of the Love and Death of Cornet Christopher Rilke* (1906).

In 1900, Rilke settled in the German artist colony of Worpswede, where he met and married sculptor Clara Westhoff. Just over a year later, only a few months after the birth of their daughter, Rilke left his family and traveled to Paris to write a book about the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. During this time Rilke was Rodin's secretary, and the artist instructed Rilke not to wait for inspiration but to observe material objects for ideas. This advice prompted a significant change in Rilke's writing, culminating in *New Poems* (1907), a collection of

"thing-poems," or lyrical poems capturing the things he had seen and studied.

**Wanderer** After the 1910 publication of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigg*, Rilke did not publish a major work for twelve years. In a state of restless inner turmoil, Rilke traveled from country to country, including Algeria and Egypt, during which time he visited the Castle Duino on the Balkan coast of the Adriatic Sea. While there, Rilke claimed, an angel appeared before him, inspiring him to begin composing a cycle of elegies that would be his ultimate poetic achievement upon its completion in 1922.

During this period, Rilke's native country, like much of Europe, was embroiled in World War I. The heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo by nationalist terrorists in 1914. His death set off a domino effect as most countries in Europe were allied. Austria-Hungary was allied with Germany and Turkey to form the Central Powers against France, Russia, Great Britain, and, later, the United States, known as the Allies. When World War I broke out, Rilke was detained in Germany for nearly five years, mostly in Munich. The war proved destructive and costly to human life for both sides, but the Allies emerged victorious in 1918. In the aftermath, the Austro-Hungarian empire collapsed and Austria was reduced to its German-speaking sections. The new republic of Austria was formed.

After the war, in 1919, Rilke began a lecture tour in Switzerland, where he lived for the rest of his life. In an explosion of creativity, he finished *Duino Elegies* (1922) and wrote *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) within three weeks, both of which brought him international recognition as a major writer. In bad health, Rilke spent his final years visiting various health spas in Switzerland. In 1926, he died of leukemia at Valmont in Montreux.

## Works in Literary Context

Throughout Rilke's life of extensive travel, he was most influenced by Paris, the city where he met sculptor Auguste Rodin and painter Paul Cézanne, artists who inspired him to regard his poems as carefully crafted objects. Encouraged by the visual arts of Rodin and Cézanne, Rilke developed a new style of writing in which he attempted to capture visual techniques in his poetry. At the end of his life, Rilke, inspired by poets Paul Valéry and Jean Cocteau, translated French poetry into German and wrote three short volumes of his own in French. Rilke was also influenced by Danish writer, Jens Peter Jacobson.

**Thing-Poems** With incredible skill, Rilke uses uncomplicated vocabulary to describe tangible subjects and objects encountered in everyday life. Rilke's thing-poems, sometimes referred to as object poems, describe physical objects as simply and precisely as possible, ideally not as they appear on the surface, but as if the writer inhabits the things from within. Observing Rodin's artistic method,

Rilke learned that the sculptor approached a piece of marble not with a predetermined plan, but with complete openness to the creative possibilities within the stone. Speculating whether this approach could be applied to writing poetry, Rodin and Rilke made a list of things in Paris that could be potential subject matter for Rilke.

Working his way down the list, Rilke visited the Paris zoo, which became the inspiration for many of his best-known thing-poems. Swans, blue hydrangeas, gazelles, flamingoes, the merry-go-round at the zoo—all were transformed into subjects for Rilke. Of the poems written during this time, “The Panther,” is the most famous and demonstrates quite clearly Rilke’s mastery of the poetic form. With beautiful minimalism, he shapes the panther out of words, as if he is a visual artist molding the animal out of clay.

**Legacy** Though his work was respected by a number of European artists at the time of his death, Rilke was virtually unknown to the general reading public. That anonymity came to an end in 1936, however, when his work was introduced into the English literary world by several translators. In addition to influencing such poets as Stephen Spender, Robert Bly, and W. H. Auden, Rilke’s work has interested several philosophers over the years, including Ludwig Wittgenstein. Because of his striking powers of perception and literary technique, modern scholars consider Rilke to be the greatest lyric poet of Germany.

### Works in Critical Context

Because of such underdeveloped collections as *Life and Songs*, Rilke’s early poetry was dismissed as maudlin and immature. In fact, looking back at his early poems from the vantage point of an older, experienced poet, Rilke himself agreed with the judgment of those critics at the beginning of his career. For many years, scholars considered Rilke’s work to be that of a religious dreamer or a mystic prophet, thus lacking literary merit. After World War II, however, Rilke was increasingly acknowledged as a writer of philosophical poetry, as well as one of literature’s first postmodern poets.

**Duino Elegies** Many literary scholars contend that Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* is one of the twentieth century’s most important works of poetry. *Duino Elegies* “might well be called the greatest set of poems of modern times,” asserts Colin Wilson in *Religion and the Rebel*. “They have had as much influence in German-speaking countries as [T. S. Eliot’s] *The Waste Land* has in England and America.” In the ten elegies of the *Duino Elegies* cycle, Rilke reflects upon the purpose of life and the task of the poet to help reconcile art and life, because art holds the ultimate creative power in the universe. Furthermore, he questions how humankind is supposed to survive in a world that is progressively becoming inhumane.

Many scholars have commended *Duino Elegies* for its acceptance of all facets of life, including the world’s destruc-

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rilke’s famous contemporaries include:

**Carl Sandburg** (1878–1967): American author. Sandburg won two Pulitzer Prizes, one for his multivolume biography of Abraham Lincoln (1940), the other for *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (1951).

**Clarence Darrow** (1857–1938): American attorney. This lawyer’s most famous case was tried in 1925, when he defended John T. Scopes, a teacher accused of teaching evolution instead of divine creation.

**Federico García Lorca** (1898–1936): Spanish poet and playwright. His work shows his conviction that art is an essential part of everyday life. His plays include *Mariana Pineda* (1927).

**Alfred Stieglitz** (1864–1946): American photographer. The husband of artist Georgia O’Keeffe, he helped photography achieve the same status as an artistic medium as painting and sculpting. His pictures include *The Hay Wagon* (1922) and *Equivalent* (1931).

**Frank Lloyd Wright** (1867–1959): American architect. He developed the Prairie School of architecture in which houses were designed with low-pitched roofs with overhanging eaves, open floor plans, and horizontal lines.

**Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971): Russian composer. Because of its musical daring, fights broke out in the audience at the premiere of his ballet, *The Rite of Spring* (1913).

tive forces. In his *Collected Criticism*, Conrad Aiken notes that “no poet before him had been brave enough to accept the *whole* of [the dark side] of the world, as if it were unquestionably valid and potentially universal.” For Rilke, the darkness was fundamentally part of the light.

**Feminist Perspectives** More recent criticism comes from a feminist perspective, which analyzes Rilke’s attitude toward women. Several feminist critics argue that although Rilke’s view of women is kind, he confines them to the same idealistic pedestal as his predecessors. His depiction of mother figures, as well as the female/male relationship in general, continues to be of interest to scholars such as poet Adrienne Rich, who, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, calls attention to the fact that “the young woman is to mediate for [the male] in his ‘monstrous’ inner life, just as the mother mediated in his childhood.” Overall, feminist critics contend, Rilke gives female characters stereotypical virtues, including selflessness and an unconditional—often unrealistic—capacity to love, virtues that he would never assign to men.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

In the latter part of his life, Rilke carried on a five-year correspondence with Franz Xaver Kappus, a young poet who had sent Rilke some poems of his own, seeking the older man's advice. Collected and published after Rilke's death, *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929) provides insight into what Rilke believed necessary for Kappus—or anyone—to be not only an artist, but also a complete person. Listed below are other works that use correspondence as a way to gain insight into a person's life and work:

*Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963* (1975), a collection of letters by Sylvia Plath, edited and selected by her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath. Written when she was in college, Plath's letters to her mother reveal both her drive for success and her periods of deep depression.

*The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett, 1845–1846, Part One* (2005), correspondence between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. The eloquent love letters exchanged between these two significant writers resulted in a passionate marriage that lasted until Barrett's death.

*Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), a film directed by Clint Eastwood. This movie is based on letters home from General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, the commander in charge on the island of Iwo Jima when it was attacked by American troops in 1944.

### Responses to Literature

1. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Poems are, with the best knowledge and intention, not to be translated without losses. I always think one should stick with the original." Given this statement, why do you think Rilke chose to translate works by the French poets André Gide and Paul Valéry? Find two different translations of one of Rilke's poems and write a paper that addresses questions like the following: What differences do you see between the two translations? What do you think caused these differences?
2. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke writes to Kappus that young people "are not yet capable of love." In the context of our own cultural habits and expectations, do you find this a shocking statement? What does Rilke mean when he says that society provides "conventions" as "life-preservers" for the common disillusionments of love? Write an essay in which you address these issues.
3. Select three everyday objects and make lists for each one in which you note sensory details and as much physical description as possible. Next, choose the one

object you feel most familiar with and write your own thing-poem of at least fifteen lines.

4. In the essay "On Transience," Sigmund Freud describes a walk with two unnamed companions—who might have been Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé, Freud's former love, as well as Rilke's. The trio is discussing human creativity from a psychoanalytic viewpoint. Drawing on what you know about Rilke's stance on art and the artist, write a script for the conversation that might have taken place among Rilke, Freud, and Andreas-Salomé.

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## Arthur Rimbaud

BORN: 1854, Charleville, France

DIED: 1891, Marseilles, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

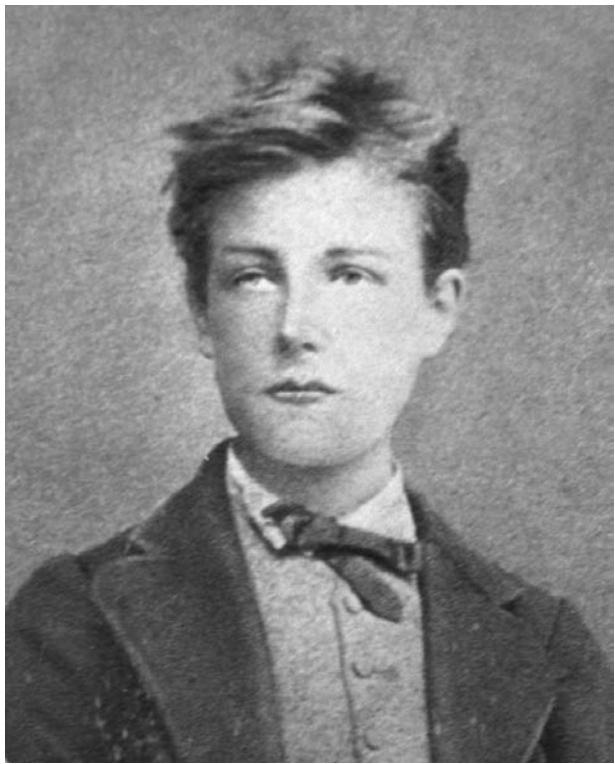
*A Season in Hell* (1873)

*Illuminations* (1886)

*The Drunken Boat* (1920)

### Overview

Arthur Rimbaud is considered one of the most influential poets in the history of French letters. Although his writing career was brief and his output small, Rimbaud's development of the prose poem and innovative use of the unconscious mind as a source of literary inspiration influenced the symbolist movement and anticipated the



Arthur Rimbaud *Rimbaud, Arthur, engraving. The Library of Congress.*

freedom of form characteristic of much contemporary poetry.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood with an Absent Father and Authoritarian Mother** Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud was born in Charleville in northeastern France on October 20, 1854, the second son of an army captain, Frédéric Rimbaud, and Marie-Cathérine-Vitalie Rimbaud. Rimbaud's father was absent during most of his childhood. Rimbaud's difficult relationship with his authoritarian mother is reflected in many of his early poems. His parents separated when he was six years old, and Rimbaud was thereafter raised by his mother in a strict religious environment. An overprotective woman, she accompanied her child to and from school, supervised his homework, and would not allow him to associate with other boys. While enrolled at the Collège de Charleville, Rimbaud excelled in all his subjects and was considered a brilliant student. His rhetoric professor, Georges Izambard, befriended the boy, and under his tutelage Rimbaud avidly read the Romantic and Parnassian poets and strove to emulate their work.

**Run Away Attempts, Arrest, and Suspected Abuse** Between 1870 and 1871, Rimbaud ran away from home three times. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in

July 1870, which ultimately ended the Second French Empire, led to the closing of his school, ending Rimbaud's formal education. In August he went to Paris, but was arrested at the train station for traveling without a ticket and was briefly imprisoned. He spent several months wandering in France and Belgium before Izambard eventually rescued the youth and brought him home. Rimbaud's growing disgust with provincial life drove him away again a few months later. Scholars believe that his experiences as a runaway may have included at least one brutal incident that strongly altered both his personality and the tone of his work. Some biographers suggest that Rimbaud may have been sexually abused by soldiers. After the incident, Rimbaud renounced his sentimental early verse and wrote poems in which he expressed disgust with life and a desire to escape from reality. In February 1871 he ran away again to join the insurgents in the Paris Commune, a sort of anarchist, proto-communist society that controlled Paris in the wake of France's defeat. He returned home three weeks later, just before the commune was brutally suppressed by the army.

**Fidelity to an Aesthetic Ideal and Unconscious Inspiration** In 1871 Rimbaud created an aesthetic doctrine, which he articulated in several letters—two to Izambard and another to a friend, Paul Demeny. The letter, now known as the “*lettre du voyant*,” or “letter of the seer,” lays out Rimbaud's concept of poetry and of his own role as a poet. After tracing the history of the genre, Rimbaud concluded that only the ancient Greeks and the French poets Louis Racine and Charles Baudelaire had created verse of any value. Castigating such authors as Alfred de Musset and Victor Hugo for their rigid and archaic writing, Rimbaud declared that the poet must “derange” his senses and delve into his unconscious in order to create a language accessible to all the senses. Rimbaud acknowledged that while this painful process involved much suffering and introspection, it was necessary to the development of vital and progressive poetry. Soon after writing the “*lettre du voyant*,” Rimbaud returned again to Charleville. Feeling stifled and depressed, he sent several poems to the renowned poet Paul Verlaine, whose works Rimbaud admired. Verlaine responded with praise and an invitation to visit him in Paris. Before he left, Rimbaud composed *The Drunken Boat* (published posthumously in 1920), a visual and verbal evocation of a savage universe in which a drifting boat serves to symbolize Rimbaud's fate as a poet. Although the versification in *The Drunken Boat* is traditional, Rimbaud's daring images and complex metaphors anticipated the philosophical concerns of his later works and his fascination with alchemy.

**Paul Verlaine, Drug Use, and Travel** In Paris, Rimbaud was warmly received by Verlaine's family, but the young poet found them representative of the bourgeois values he disdained and quickly alienated them with

his flagrantly antisocial behavior. However, Verlaine himself was strongly drawn to Rimbaud, and the two writers began a notorious and stormy homosexual relationship. They drank absinthe (a strong liquor reputed to cause hallucinations) heavily, claiming that the liquor was “an enlightened nectar from God.” At first, Rimbaud was admired by the Parisian writers who gathered in the city’s cafés—Victor Hugo called him “a young Shakespeare”—but the youthful poet left Paris when his consistently drunken and rude behavior made him increasingly unpopular. Verlaine, after unsuccessfully attempting reconciliation with his wife, pleaded for Rimbaud to return, declaring that he could not live without him. Rimbaud complied, and the two poets traveled through England and Belgium from 1872 to 1873.

Rimbaud believed that his dissipated lifestyle was a form of artistic stimulation, and his creativity flourished during this period. He studied Eastern religion and alchemy, denied himself sleep, and took hallucinogenic drugs. During this time he also wrote *La chasse spirituelle*, a work speculated to have later been destroyed by Verlaine’s wife. According to Verlaine, this work was Rimbaud’s intended masterpiece.

**Violent Relationship Termination and Farewell to Poetry** As his literary output increased, Rimbaud began to find his relationship with Verlaine tiresome. After a series of quarrels and separations, Rimbaud, overwhelmed by Verlaine’s suffocating affection, demanded an end to the relationship. In desperation, Verlaine shot Rimbaud, wounding him in the wrist. Verlaine was imprisoned in Brussels for two years, and Rimbaud went to his family’s new home in Roche, a small village near Charleville. There he finished *A Season in Hell*, a volume composed of nine prose poems of various lengths. Although some commentators have characterized *A Season in Hell* as a chronicle of Rimbaud’s tumultuous relationship with Verlaine, others contend that the work conveys Rimbaud’s admission that his early theory of poetry was false and unattainable. Despite controversy concerning whether the book was written before or after *Illuminations*, *A Season in Hell* is often considered Rimbaud’s “farewell to poetry.”

**Chaotic Poetic Visions** In 1873, Rimbaud returned to Paris, where he completed *Illuminations*, a work thought to have been written over the course of two years. In this collection of prose poems, Rimbaud abandoned the rules of syntax, language, and rhythm, and sought to express the chaos of his poetic vision. While several critics have interpreted the childlike awe and wonder exhibited in these poems as an expression of Rimbaud’s Catholic faith, most contend that Rimbaud was attempting to recapture the innocent exuberance of youth.

**Retirement, Cancer, and Death** Upon completing these poems, Rimbaud gave the manuscript to Verlaine and ceased to write. After ending his literary career,

Rimbaud decided to become “a real adventurer instead of a mystic vagabond” and traveled throughout Europe and Africa. He finally settled in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) where he was believed to have worked as a gunrunner and slave trader. In 1886, Verlaine, assuming his friend to be dead, published the manuscript Rimbaud had given him as “*Les illuminations* by the late Arthur Rimbaud.” Though Rimbaud later learned of its popular reception and of the Rimbaud “cult” that was developing in Paris, he expressed no interest in returning to his former life. Instead, in an abrupt change from his earlier beliefs and practice, Rimbaud spoke enthusiastically of marrying and having a son. These dreams went unrealized, however, for he developed cancer in his right knee and was forced to return to France for medical treatment. Rimbaud’s leg was amputated, but the cancer continued to spread and he died soon afterward in 1891.

## Works in Literary Context

Rimbaud’s pursuit of a new poetic language is the defining and enduring aspect of his artistic career. After initially seeking to imitate the Romantic and Parnassian poets he read during his early education, only the work of Louis Racine and Charles Baudelaire earned his respect. His essential thematic preoccupations—the journey of discovery, the world of the child, the phenomenon of revolt—are developed in conjunction with his ambition to redefine the poetic word, to liberate it from the shackles of debilitating forms and rules, and to arrive at a much more supple and flexible medium of expression, free from convention and characterized by a vitality and an exciting “otherness” that permit endless innovation and surprise.

**Revolution of Form** The “alchemist of the word,” as he liked to style himself in youth, was committed to experiments of all sorts. One can scarcely explain what a full bag of tricks he seemed to have and with what eagerness he played them. He was one of the first to employ distortions and dissociations systematically. He used verbs, instead of adjectives, to lend violence to his page; he used adjectives chiefly to summon up precise colors. He sought a great variety of meters, ranging from that of the quick, nervous lyric to that of pompous oration; he also broke from regular meter to experiment with free verse. He would use the tones of direct vulgar speech or technical and scientific language, depending upon his purpose. And significantly he would use repetition or “recapitulation,” of phrases or images, in the way of a sonata or a symphony, scorning the sequence of common-sense, informative literature, as no one had dared before him. “His form was musical,” poet Paul Claudel observes.

**Fairy Tales and Riddles** A prominent source of inspiration in all of Rimbaud’s poetry is the fairy tale, which is clearly linked with his preoccupation with the child and the child’s imagination. In *Illuminations* “Tale,” “Dawn,” and “Royalty” are obviously based on

the structure of the fairy tale. Each poem has a distinctly narrative development, and “Tale” and “Royalty” include regal characters (prince, king, and queen) involved in the pursuit of happiness on a personal or public level. Rimbaud, however, tends to subvert the traditional fairy-tale happy ending by setting up an apparently happy outcome and then destabilizing it.

Other poems that might be loosely grouped under a common heading are those that seem to constitute riddles, puzzles, and enigmas. In these poems Rimbaud poses problems for his readers and often uses the finale of the text to tantalize, disconcert, or confuse them. A master of beginnings and endings, he frequently deploys an isolated final line to set a problem or issue a challenge; these final lines are a most original feature of *Illuminations*. Other sequences in the collection enhance a sense of mystery and the unknown. For example, in “Childhood III,” “Childhood IV,” “Vigils I,” “Sale,” and “Fairy,” a grouping of linguistic units bound together by the same linguistic formula perplexes the reader as to just what is being described.

**Influence** Rimbaud continues to be one of the most widely studied poets in world literature. Although he himself abandoned poetry after a literary career of less than five years, Rimbaud’s influence on Verlaine and the subsequent symbolist movement is considered to be lasting and profound.

### Works in Critical Context

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Arthur Rimbaud’s poetry on subsequent practitioners of the genre. His impact on the surrealist movement has been widely acknowledged, and a host of poets, from André Breton to André Freyraud, have recognized their indebtedness to Rimbaud’s vision and technique.

***Illuminations*** For many critics, *Illuminations* is Rimbaud’s most important and technically sophisticated work. Literary critic Enid Starkie asserts:

[We] find in *Illuminations* all the things which had filled [Rimbaud’s] imaginative life as a child—all the characters and stage properties of the fairy-tales and novels of adventure which had been his chief reading. These now mingled with his recent study of alchemy and magic, the subject matter of which . . . was of the same legendary and mythical nature.

These and many other ingredients have created a sense of bewilderment in some readers of the poems; the critic Atle Kittang has even referred to the “illisibilité” (unreadability) of the collection. Critic C. A. Hackett, however, writes of Rimbaud’s work, “We experience an intense exhilaration as we move through Rimbaud’s imaginary world where objects and people are seen as poetic essences, and the elements themselves—earth, air, fire, water—appear to be transformed and made new.”

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rimbaud’s famous contemporaries include:

**Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928): English naturalist poet and novelist. Best remembered for his novels *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native*, Hardy considered himself a poet first and foremost.

**Ambrose Bierce** (1842–1914?): American journalist and satirist. Bierce was a man ahead of his time, often displaying a cynicism and wit more typical of later twentieth-century writers and critics. He disappeared while traveling with rebel troops during the Mexican Revolution.

**Levi Strauss** (1829–1902): German immigrant Strauss moved to San Francisco in 1853, where he founded Levi Strauss & Co. and began making a new type of hard-wearing, riveted pants manufactured from denim cloth. The new “jeans” were an immediate sensation, launching one of the best-known American entrepreneurial success stories.

**Thomas Nast** (1840–1902): Nast is considered the first modern political cartoonist. His cartoons created many enduring icons, among them the modern images of Santa Claus and Uncle Sam as well as the Democratic donkey and Republican elephant.

**Karl Benz** (1844–1929): In 1879 German engineer Karl Benz filed the first patent for a gasoline-powered internal combustion engine. In 1885 Benz built the first commercial automobile, the *Motorwagen*. He also invented many of the key components of the automobile: the accelerator, the spark plug, the clutch, the gear shift, and the carburetor.

### Responses to Literature

1. Discuss the use of symbolism in *A Season in Hell*.
2. Rimbaud was a major influence on other symbolists. What differentiated symbolism from realism? How did symbolism influence modernism?
3. Rimbaud was the archetypal angry young artist. Do you believe it is necessary to suffer for art? Can art of importance be created without leading a life filled with pain, drug abuse, and the usual litany of sins ascribed to the artistic lifestyle?
4. Rimbaud’s poetry was influential on rock lyricists from Bob Dylan to Jim Morrison to Kurt Cobain. Research these lyricists and some of their songs. How is Rimbaud’s influence felt in their lyrics? Did Rimbaud’s lifestyle influence their behavior as well?

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rimbaud's poetry is placed within the symbolist school, a nineteenth-century artistic movement that rejected the earlier realist movement. Below are some other examples of symbolist works:

*Sagesse* (1880), a poetry collection by Paul Verlaine. A transitional work between symbolism and modernism, this collection deals with themes of maturation and change.

*Les amours jaunes* (1873), a poetry collection by Tristan Corbière. Corbière was an obscure poet until Paul Verlaine included his work in his gallery of "accursed poets," after which he was quickly recognized as a leading symbolist poet. Unfortunately Corbière did not live long to enjoy his newfound success, dying at age twenty-nine of tuberculosis.

*The Afternoon of a Faun* (1876), a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. One of the seminal symbolist works, this poem inspired theatrical adaptations by the likes of Claude Debussy and Vaslav Nijinsky and was a tremendous influence on later modernists.

*Salomé* (1891), a play by Oscar Wilde. A one-act symbolist play that tells the story of the murder of John the Baptist. The "Dance of the Seven Veils" and the climax featuring John the Baptist's severed head scandalized London society at the time.

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## Augusto Roa Bastos

BORN: 1917, Asunción, Paraguay

DIED: 2005, Asunción, Paraguay

NATIONALITY: Paraguayan

GENRE: Fiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Thunder Among the Leaves* (1953)

*Son of Man* (1960)

*I the Supreme* (1974)

*The Prosecutor* (1993)

### Overview

Augusto Roa Bastos is Paraguay's most widely acclaimed author. His fiction reflects the political oppression, violence, and material hardship of life in his native country. Drawing freely from the history and folklore of Paraguay, his prose is a blend of myth, fantasy, and realism that expresses the author's social concerns as well as his belief in the redemptive power of suffering and sacrifice. He is best known for his two novels, *Son of Man* (1960) and *I the Supreme* (1974), both of which employ unconventional narrative structures and the stylistic techniques of magic realism.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**War-Marred Teen Years** Roa Bastos was born in Asunción, Paraguay, on June 13, 1917, a time when his country's economy was stagnating and a large influx of immigrants from Italy, Spain, Germany, and Argentina were coming in to replace the male population lost in the bloody War of Triple Alliance (1865–1870). He was raised two hundred kilometers south in Iturbe, where his father helped run a sugar plantation. He grew up bilingual, speaking both Spanish and the Paraguayan indigenous language, Guaraní. With the encouragement of his mother, he began to write short stories at the age of thirteen.

Roa Bastos grew up in one of Latin America's poorest and least developed nations. In 1932, Bolivia attacked Paraguayan soldiers in the frontier region of Chaco because oil had been found there, sparking a war that lasted until 1935. Roa Bastos, still in his teens, joined the military and was assigned to guard prisoners and record deaths during the so-called Chaco War. Despite being outnumbered three to one, the Paraguayans had higher morale, were brilliantly led, and were better adapted to the climate of the region than were their Bolivian attackers. Paraguayans conquered about 75 percent of the disputed territory, most of which they retained when a



Augusto Roa Bastos *Roa Bastos, Augusto, photograph. AP Images.*

peace treaty was reached in 1938. Roa Bastos's wartime experience led him to become a pacifist.

**Launched Writing Career** After the war, Roa Bastos worked as a journalist and began writing poems and plays. He won a Paraguayan literary prize in 1941 for a book that was never published. In 1942, he published a book of poetry, *El ruisenor de la aurora, y otros poemas*, though he later renounced this work as insignificant. That same year, he started working for the daily newspaper *El País*, eventually rising to the post of editor in chief.

Toward the end of World War II, Roa Bastos went to London on a journalism fellowship. As war correspondent for a daily newspaper in Asunción, he witnessed the city's devastation by German bombardment and interviewed General Charles de Gaulle, the leader of France, in Paris. During World War II, Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, was able to fulfill territorial ambitions by conquering much of Europe. Extensive bombing of Great Britain was believed to be, in part, preparation for a Nazi invasion. The invasion never came and the British together with the American and other Allies, were able to defeat the Germans in the mid-1940s.

Roa Bastos went home to more war. In 1947, a popular revolt against the oppressive regime of General Higinio Morínigo led to civil war in Paraguay. Morínigo's troops shut down *El País* and destroyed its presses. Along with half a million Paraguayans, Roa Bastos fled the country into neighboring Argentina. His exile would last more than forty years. Though Morínigo retired in 1948,

he was replaced by another oppressive dictator, General Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled for four decades.

**Publishing during Exile** Roa Bastos settled in Buenos Aires, where he did his most successful writing. He ultimately came to feel that exile was beneficial to his artistic expression since it allowed him to see his own country from other points of view. He told the *New York Times Book Review*: "I try to see exile not as a political sanction, as a punishment or restriction, but as something that has forced me to open to the world, to look at it in all of its complexity and breadth."

He turned to writing fiction after moving to Buenos Aires, publishing a collection of short stories, *Thunder Among the Leaves* (1953). The stories cover themes Roa Bastos would later explore in his novels. They deal with the social, political, and economic injustices plaguing Paraguay—the nation had endured six more revolts in the late 1940s—and depict the contrast between the culture and values of the country's indigenous people and those of its European upper classes. Some critics have suggested that the dismal conclusions of works like "The Excavation" reflect Roa Bastos's belief at the time that rampant oppression would dominate life in Paraguay indefinitely.

**Critical Acclaim** Roa Bastos achieved critical success with his first novel, *Son of Man* (1960). The novel chronicles the struggle between the rich and the poor over more than two decades of Paraguayan history, from the early twentieth century through the Chaco War. It interweaves multiple narratives with legends tracing Paraguay's history back to the dictatorship of Jose Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia, which began in 1814. Roa Bastos explores the relation between history and myth by linking events in the novel to distant historical episodes, and transforming the same events into folklore as the novel unfolds. The author also adapted *Son of Man* into his first screenplay in 1960. Several of his later screenplays, such as *Alias Gardelito* (1961), were made into landmark works of Argentina's *nuevo cine* movement.

**Subversive Writings** Roa Bastos published his masterpiece, *I the Supreme*, in 1974. The complex and unusual novel is a fictional treatment of the final days of the despot Francia, who called himself "The Supreme." After the Argentine military took over the government by a coup in March 1976, sales of *I the Supreme* were banned in the country, and Roa Bastos was once more exiled. He moved to France, where he became an associate professor of Guarani and Spanish American studies at the University of Toulouse. He made several surreptitious visits to his native country during the 1970s. On a similar trip in 1982, he was discovered by Paraguayan officials, summarily expelled, and forbidden to return. Then in 1989, Stroessner was finally deposed after thirty-five years in power. The incoming leader, General Andrés Rodríguez, gave

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Bastos's famous contemporaries include:

**Carlos Fuentes** (1928–): Mexican novelist known for intertwining myth, legend, and history to examine his country's roots. His novels include *Aura* (1962).

**Octavio Paz** (1914–1998): Mexican novelist, essayist, poet, and diplomat was the first Mexican to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. His books include *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950, rev. ed. 1975).

**Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973): Chilean poet, Communist diplomat, and Nobel Prize winner noted for his innovative techniques in modern poetry. His poetry collections include *Book of Twilights* (1923).

**José Lezama Lima** (1910–1976): Cuban poet who was an influential figure in Latin American literature and who wrote in a baroque style. His novels include *Paradiso* (1966).

**Gore Vidal** (1925–): American historical novelist and social critic, is known to millions as a witty and wicked talk show guest and a two-time political candidate. His novels include *The City and the Pillar* (1948).

**Juan Perón** (1895–1974): Argentine colonel and politician who served as president of Argentina from 1946 to 1955 and from 1973 to 1974, being exiled in Paraguay in between.

more freedoms to his people and invited the distinguished literary figure to return home after forty-two years in exile.

**Return to Paraguay** During the 1990s, Roa Bastos continued to produce fiction that addressed dictatorship and political power. *Vigil of the Admiral* (1992) is a historical novel about Christopher Columbus, published amidst commemorations of the five hundredth anniversary of the explorer's first voyage. *The Prosecutor* (1993) concerns two Paraguayan military dictators: Carlos Antonio Solano Lopez, who controlled the country during the 1860s, and Stroessner. The author considered *The Prosecutor* the final work of a political trilogy, along with *Son of Man* and *I the Supreme*. Roa Bastos continued to write until his death on April 26, 2005, in Asunción.

### Works in Literary Context

Roa Bastos's literary education began at the age of ten when his parents sent him to live with his uncle in Asunción and attend school. In his uncle's library, Roa Bastos discovered classical Spanish literature, works that became the first models for his own writing. Notable precursors to Roa Bastos include: the seventeenth-century Spanish explorer Ruy Diaz de Guzman, who wrote about the

geography of Paraguay; Rafael Barrett, an obscure Spanish anarchist who wrote in Paraguay at the turn of the twentieth century; and the Uruguayan fiction writer Horacio Quiroga. Miguel de Cervantes's classic *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) is a model for the structure employed in *I the Supreme*. In addition to the classics, Roa Bastos's experience with the Guarani (indigenous people found in Paraguay and other parts of South America) influenced both the cultural context and the sensitivity to social injustice found in his work.

**Neobaroque Style** Roa Bastos wrote in a neobaroque style common to Latin American literature of the mid-twentieth century. This style is found in the early works of Jorge Luis Borges, the novels of Alejo Carpentier, and the poetry of Pablo Neruda. The well-known Latin American genre of magical realism is an outgrowth of this literary school. Roa Bastos employs magical realist techniques while drawing on indigenous folklore and Christian mythology to underscore the force the past exerts over the present. His use of the Guarani language—one of the few indigenous languages that remains in widespread use in South America—grounds his writing in the specific cultural experience of the Paraguayan people, and allows him to incorporate the silenced voices of indigenous people in his stories.

**Thematic Concerns** All of Roa Bastos's mature writing concerns the oppressive power structure of Paraguayan society, from its historical roots through contemporary times. Many of his stories portray human endurance in the face of injustice or hardship and feature Christlike characters whose sacrificial suffering is intended to free their countrymen from political oppression. *Son of Man* is rich in Christian metaphors, including the figures of Christobal Jara, an uneducated peasant who becomes a Christlike leader, and Miguel Vera, the middle-class narrator who takes on the role of Judas.

**Literary Impact** Roa Bastos's novels have been influential in the development of Latin American historical fiction and its use as a vehicle for social commentary. *I the Supreme* was partially responsible for the flourishing of a genre called the “dictator novel,” along with *Reasons of State* (1974) by Alejo Carpentier, and *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) by Gabriel García Márquez. Critics regard Roa Bastos as one of the leading writers of the Latin American “boom.” His influence is visible in the work of postboom writers such as Isabel Allende and Antonio Skarmeta. Roa Bastos remains the leading literary figure in Paraguay and a significant influence upon contemporary Paraguayan literature.

### Works in Critical Context

On the strength of *I the Supreme*, a universally acclaimed work, critics often place Roa Bastos in the front rank of twentieth-century Latin American novelists. Roa Bastos

was awarded Spanish literature's most valuable award, the Miguel de Cervantes Prize, in 1989, the year of his return to Paraguay. *Son of Man* is also highly regarded, particularly as a work of literary regionalism. Roa Bastos never achieved great commercial success outside Paraguay, and his work is not widely known in the English-speaking world, despite a highly praised English translation of *I the Supreme*, published in 1986.

**Dictator Novel** *I the Supreme* was a literary success when it was first published. The story is based on Francia, a former revolutionary, who ruled Paraguay absolutely from 1814 until his death in 1840. The novel offers a hypothetical account of a dying Francia's attempt to justify his obsessive use of power. Critics consider *I the Supreme* a complicated novel, as Roa Bastos employs many unconventional narratives. He uses fragmented dreams, excerpts from actual historical documents, extended soliloquies, comments by the narrator (referred to in the text as the Compiler), and fantasy-like material (such as a conversation between Francia and his dog) to blur reality with fiction. Many critics concur with Mexican author Carlos Fuentes in calling *I the Supreme* "one of the milestones of the Latin American novel." *Washington Post Book World* contributor Paul West concurred, proclaiming: "Augusto Roa Bastos is himself a supreme find, maybe the most complex and brilliant... Latin American novelist of all."

## Responses to Literature

1. Research the early history of Paraguay and the Guarani language. What unique features of Paraguayan society does Roa Bastos highlight in his fiction? Write a paper that outlines your findings.
2. *I the Supreme* is often linked with *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, by Gabriel García Márquez, as early examples of the "dictator novel." Compare the psychological and social perspectives in the two works in an essay.
3. Would you consider *Son of Man* a Christian work? Why do you think Roa Bastos employs Christian metaphors and images? Create a presentation of your findings for the class.
4. Would you consider Roa Bastos a political novelist? In a group discussion, find examples in which Roa Bastos advocates a particular cause, party, or policy.
5. Write an exploratory essay about the relationship between history and mythology in Latin America, as viewed through the novels of Roa Bastos.

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The "dictator novel," an important genre in the Latin American literary tradition, has become a worldwide phenomenon. The following works all examine the psychology of absolute power and its profound social impact.

- El Señor Presidente* (1946), a novel by Miguel Ángel Asturias. This early work of magical realism, by a Nobel Prize-winning author, is inspired by the twenty-year reign of Manuel Estrada Cabrera in Guatemala.
- Reasons of State* (1974), a novel by Alejo Carpentier. A satirical novel about a Latin American dictator who attempts to control insurrections from his home in Europe.
- The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), a novel by Gabriel García Márquez. The eternal dictator portrayed in this novel, "El Macho," is said to be two hundred years old as the tragedy of despotism unfolds over and over again.
- The Last King of Scotland* (1998), a novel by Giles Foden. A fictional account of the rise of Ugandan president Idi Amin, made into a film in 2006.
- The Feast of the Goat* (2000), a novel by Mario Vargas Llosa. Vargas Llosa, himself a presidential candidate in Peru, spins a tale interweaving the stories of Dominican tyrant Rafael Trujillo, his assassins, and the daughter of one of the dictator's close advisers.
- Downfall* (2004), a film written by Bernd Eichinger and directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel. This film, set mostly in Hitler's bunker, depicts the final days of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich.

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## ■ Alain Robbe-Grillet

BORN: 1922, Brest, France

DIED: 2008, Caen, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Novels, screenplays, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Erasers* (1953)

*The Voyeur* (1958)

*Jealousy* (1957)

*Last Year at Marienbad* (1961)

*Snapshots* (1962)

### Overview

French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet is among the foremost proponents and theoreticians of *le nouveau roman*, also referred to as the new novel or antinovel. He strives for pure objectivity in his fiction, making camera-like use of point-of-view by spontaneously recording events without imposing subjective interpretation. He favors disjointed narratives, characters with vague or shifting identities, metafictional situations, and *chosisme*, the precisely detailed description of inanimate objects. Robbe-Grillet purposely leaves meanings ambiguous or contradictory to allow readers to exercise their individual perceptions, yet his fiction is not devoid of meaning, as objects elicit symbolic associations in the minds of readers. The major interest of Robbe-Grillet's work lies in the collaboration between author and reader, the process by which objective reality acquires subjective meaning.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Sent to Germany by Vichy France** Alain Robbe-Grillet was born on August 18, 1922, in Brest, Finistère, in northwestern France, to Gaston Robbe-Grillet, the owner of a small manufacturing business, and Yvonne Canu Robbe-Grillet. He was educated at the Lycées Buffon



Alain Robbe-Grillet Robbe-Grillet, Alain, photograph. © Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission.

and St. Louis in Paris and at the Lycée de Brest, where he initially studied mathematics and biology.

In 1940, during World War II, France was invaded by German forces. This resulted in the German occupation of much of France, with the rest of the country remaining "free" under a provisional government approved by the Germans and based in the city of Vichy. The Vichy government, in an effort to appease the Germans, sent hundreds of thousands of French citizens to Germany as forced laborers intended to aid Germany in their war efforts. Robbe-Grillet was one such worker, spending time in a German tank factory.

**Wide Travels as an Agricultural Scientist** After returning to France, and having received his engineering degree from the National Agricultural Institute of France in 1944, he pursued a scientific career as an officer at the National Institute of Statistics in Paris from 1945 to 1948.

From 1948 to 1951 he worked in Morocco, Guinea, Guadeloupe, and Martinique for the Institut des Fruits et Agrumes Coloniaux, or Colonial Fruit Institute, but fell ill and had to be repatriated on health grounds. He never returned to his career as an agricultural scientist, becoming a full-time writer instead.

**Literary Interests** Robbe-Grillet joined the publishing house Les Editions de Minuit as a literary consultant in 1955. Under the direction of the esteemed Jérôme Lindon, the company drew a select literary group of such writers as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Butor, Jacques Derrida, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon. Like Robbe-Grillet, they each possessed a distinctive style and voice, but together agreed the nineteenth-century social novel was on its way out.

Robbe-Grillet wrote his first, and one of the first, “new novels,” *The Regicide* (*Un Régicide*), as he worked in his sister Marie-Claire’s biology laboratory in 1949—though it would not be published until 1978. His next novel, however, would make him what most consider the leader of the *nouveau roman* movement.

**Novel Form Innovation** Robbe-Grillet and his literary group opposed the bourgeois, or Balzacian (after nineteenth century novelist Honoré de Balzac), novel of humanist tradition. Instead, they preferred the geometrical precision and clinical exactitude of a scientific-literary approach. Known as the first “cubist” novelist and a “chosist,” for his obsessive focus on inanimate objects (*chose* is the French word for “thing”), Robbe-Grillet initially described the *nouveau roman* and became the leading exponent of the New Wave in contemporary French literature. His revolutionary theories are based on the premise that man’s perception of his surroundings is distorted by his bourgeois background and its resulting emotionalism. Characterized by an objective accuracy in its detailed descriptions, Robbe-Grillet’s writing is free of intangible, inferential adjectives. It is bare and concrete instead, with little or no dialogue and with the objects in repetition as the central focus and movers of plot.

*The Erasers* (*Les Gommes*, 1953), for example, initially appears to be a conventional detective thriller. Instead, it reworks the themes of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Written when Robbe-Grillet fell ill in 1951, the work is intended as a comic parody, with a narrative that illustrates the *chosist* technique in its intense focus on the India rubber of the title. That rubber serves as an antisymbol for the author. Similarly, *The Voyeur* (*Le Voyeur*, 1955) explores the psychology of a rapist, but does so without either conversation or interior monologue. The exaggerated realism of the physical descriptions create a dreamlike air of surrealism in this work.

The next novels—*Jealousy* (*La Jalouse*, 1957) and *In the Labyrinth* (*Dans le labyrinthe*, 1959)—would confirm Robbe-Grillet’s place in literary history. *Jealousy* won the Prix des Critiques and the praise of fellow writers such as the eminent Vladimir Nabokov, who called the work one of the greatest novels of the century.

**Parallel Careers** After marrying actress and photographer Catherine Rstakian in 1957, and after accepting a post as a member of the High Committee for the Preservation and Expansion of the French Language, the then forty-year-old Robbe-Grillet embarked on a parallel career as screenwriter and director.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Robbe-Grillet’s famous contemporaries include:

- Daphne du Maurier** (1907–1989): British novelist known for “sensation” novels like *Rebecca* (1938).
- Ian Fleming** (1908–1964): British writer famous for creating the spy hero James Bond.
- Ronald Reagan** (1911–2004): Former Hollywood actor who served as president of the United States from 1981 to 1989.
- Jean-Luc Godard** (1930–): French-Swiss filmmaker best known for being one of the pioneers of French New Wave cinema.
- Norman Lear** (1922–): American television writer and producer who has become a legend for producing such iconic shows as *All in the Family*, *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Maude*.

Robbe-Grillet’s finest film effort may be *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). The film, directed by Alain Resnais, created considerable critical controversy and captured the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival. The surprising commercial success of the film permitted its author to undertake other cinematic efforts, notably *The Immortal* (1963), winner of the Louis Delluc prize, and the first film Robbe-Grillet both wrote and directed, *Trans-Europe Express* (1967).

Robbe-Grillet was a professor at New York University from 1971 to 1995. He died in 2008 from heart problems.

## Works in Literary Context

**The New Novel** The name Alain Robbe-Grillet is tied to the French avant-garde literary form known as the *nouveau roman*, or the New Novel, which he helped propagate. As the acknowledged leader and spokesman of the New Novelists in France, Robbe-Grillet had denounced those who talk of the novelist’s social responsibility; for him the novel is not a tool and probably has little effect on society. “For us,” he once wrote, “literature is not a means of expression, but a search. And it does not even know for what it searches.... [But] we prefer our searches, our doubts, our contradictions, our joy of having yet invented something.”

**Deconstructing Genre Conventions** *The Voyeur* is widely regarded as Robbe-Grillet’s finest work, an impressive and moving piece of fiction in which the technique of narration is exactly appropriate to the subject, a novel that owes something of its form, manner, and tone to the traditional detective story but that transcends its model. It handles a serious and emotional topic—rape followed by murder—with sensationalizing or trivializing it. In

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The New Novelists, Robbe-Grillet among them, introduced experimental concepts into the French novel. Occasionally described as "the school of sight" or "the pen camera," the form of writing Robbe-Grillet helped develop concentrates on vision and gives minute descriptions of matter-of-fact objects. Here are a few works by writers who also wrote in the style of or were associated with the movement of *nouveau roman*:

*Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), a screenplay by Marguerite Duras. The classic French New Wave screenplay that is rich in themes and innovative in its early use of the flashback device.

*Hopscotch* (1963), a novel by Julio Cortázar. A stream-of-consciousness novel that often defies categorization to the point of being called the "novel without a genre" as it plays with readers' minds and turns on itself.

*The Flanders Road* (1960), a novel by Claude Simon. A *nouveau roman* novel of thousand-word sentences and stream-of-consciousness style and a conspicuous absence of punctuation.

*The Voyeur* he handles the protagonist's death with black humor, perhaps, but in such a way that the basic seriousness of her murderer's sick mentality is not ignored.

If *The Voyeur* is Robbe-Grillet's masterpiece, his next novel, *Jealousy* (1959), is the one by which he is perhaps best known. The title itself provides a key to the double meaning that lies at the heart of the book: in French, *la jalouse* not only means jealousy but also is the ordinary word for slatted shutters or blinds. In this novel a jealous husband spies on his wife from the wide balcony of their house as she sits behind the blinds in her bedroom; the blinds give him an uneasy sense of security and yet also a voyeuristic thrill. Thus *Jealousy* takes up where *The Voyeur* left off: the narrator and the voyeur are now one.

**Influences** Robbe-Grillet claims as the inspiration for his novels "the first fifty pages of Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) and the works of Raymond Rousset" (the latter a little-known author who died in the 1930s). Critical analysis has also recognized the profound impact of the novels of Franz Kafka and Graham Greene on his work.

### Works in Critical Context

Robbe-Grillet's literary preoccupation with inanimate objects has led critics, notably François Mauriac, to suggest that the author dehumanizes literature. Moreover, confusion for many readers results from the lack of dis-

tinction between a seen object and one that is imagined; reality for Robbe-Grillet is always flowing from one state to another. Descriptions are repeated with slight variations, leading to charges of obscurity and tedium. Nevertheless, of the early Robbe-Grillet novels, works such as *Jealousy* garner much respectful attention.

**Jealousy** *Jealousy* is regarded by many critics as one of the writer's more important efforts. Set on a tropical banana plantation (harkening to the author's early vocation), the book involves an untrusting husband who spies on his wife, referred to as A, in an effort to confirm his suspicion that she is having an affair with a neighboring man. All indications of the subjective eye of the author are removed, resulting in a new literary mode. In the tradition of *chosisme*, noted Ben Stoltzfus in a *Symposium* essay, *Jealousy* "confines itself for the most part to situating, describing and defining objects and events in space." And, adds John Fletcher in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the husband's descent into perversity is what makes *Jealousy* "a tour de force as a psychological novel."

### Responses to Literature

1. Make note of all the associations you thought of while reading *The Erasers* and compare your list to how erasers are used in the novel. If the *nouveau roman* style of the novel "dispenses with traditional elements such as plot and character," what sensations do you get from the erasers? What sensations do you get from the other objects? What human sensations do you think they take the place of?
2. Using the Internet and library sources, research the *nouveau roman* style and write a paper about its history. What literary style came before it? How did that style affect the *nouveau roman* style? In your paper, be sure to name *nouveau roman* writers and their major works.
3. Look up the word *bourgeois* in the dictionary. Why do you think Robbe-Grillet and fellow writers of his time objected to bourgeois values? Do you agree with their assessment of the bourgeoisie?

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## T. W. Robertson

BORN: 1829, Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire, England

DIED: 1871, London, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*Society* (1865)

*Ours* (1866)

*Caste* (1867)

*Play* (1868)

*M. P.* (1870)



Thomas William Robertson Hulton Archive / Getty Images

### Overview

Thomas William Robertson (known professionally as T. W. Robertson) was a dramatist best known for his romantic comedies. He is associated with the transitional period in English theater when playwrights working in an extravagant, artificial, and melodramatic style began to move toward greater realism. Robertson's plays feature realistic characterizations and dialogue and are known today for their meticulous details in stage direction.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Early Flair for the Dramatic** Robertson was born in 1829 in Newark-upon-Trent, Nottinghamshire, to a theatrical family. His parents were both actors—his father was a stage manager as well—and his youngest sister became a leading Victorian actress under the name Madge Kendal. Robertson made his stage debut at the age of five in the musical drama *Rob Roy*. In 1836, he began his formal education at a boarding school, but he returned to Newark after only seven years to help support his family. Working as an assistant to his father, he learned much about various aspects of the theater, including scene painting, prompting, stage-managing, acting, singing, and song-writing. In 1849, Robertson's father's theater company disbanded, and Robertson went to London, where he began writing plays while continuing to act in minor pro-

ductions. By 1851, he was producing such plays as the farcical *A Night's Adventure* at the Olympic Theatre in London. The production was not successful, however, so Robertson continued acting and began writing, contributing to the local newspapers of the day.

**From Actor to Playwright and Drama Critic** In 1856, Robertson married an actress named Elizabeth Burton, and together they performed at the Theatre Royal, Dublin, where Robertson also worked as stage manager. In the late 1850s, he gave up acting and began writing dramatic reviews with W. S. Gilbert for the periodical *Fun*. He also contributed to the *Illustrated Times, London Society, Comic News*, and other publications, eventually becoming the drama critic for the *Illustrated Times* under the pseudonym "Theatrical Lounger." He gained additional writing experience adapting and translating French plays, most of which were sold to Thomas Haile Lacy, the leading theatrical publisher of the nineteenth century.

In the 1860s, Robertson was working as an editor and writing on the side. He wrote a novel that was later adapted for the stage as *Shadow-Tree Swift*, performed in 1867. Robertson also wrote a second farce, *A Cantab*, which was performed at London's Royal Strand Theatre in 1861. This play earned him little profit, and he considered giving up writing to become a tobacconist. But the comedy also brought Robertson attention from the

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Robertson's famous contemporaries include:

- Louisa May Alcott** (1832–1888): American novelist best known for her book *Little Women* (1868). She was also a seamstress, servant, teacher, and Civil War nurse before becoming an author.
- Gustave Flaubert** (1821–1880): French writer best known for his novel *Madame Bovary* (1857).
- Susan B. Anthony** (1820–1906): American civil rights advocate and leader, she was instrumental in the securing of women's rights, including the 1919 right to vote.
- Ida B. Wells Barnett** (1862–1931): African American civil and women's rights advocate who cofounded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1919.
- Norman Pogson** (1829–1891): English astronomer, he became India's government astronomer, initiated the Madras Catalogue of stars, and made several important discoveries.
- Leo Tolstoy** (1828–1891): Russian novelist, essayist, dramatist and philosopher, he is known for his masterpieces, *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877) and *War and Peace* (1865–1969).

writers at *Fun* and he began to build a reputation in the theater.

**First Minor Hit** Robertson first achieved minor success with *David Garrick* (1865), an adaptation of a French play by Melesville (the pseudonym of Anne-Honore-Joseph Duveyrier), which was performed at Haymarket Theatre, featuring Edward Sothern in the lead role. Robertson was soon introduced to Squire Bancroft and his wife, Marie Wilton, actors who owned the Prince of Wales's Theatre. The Bancrofts produced and acted in Robertson's most successful plays between 1865 and 1870.

**Eventual Success** By 1865, Robertson was gaining popularity and even critical acclaim, beginning with *Society*, produced at the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1865. Wilton's management of the production made popular the new "box-set" stage, which housed the popular drawing-room drama. Robertson's fresh approach began a new kind of play called the "problem play." The novelty of the production had great appeal, and the small and intimate Tottenham Street house was packed.

Robertson, with health compromised, nevertheless repeated the success of *Society* with several more of these innovations—the most popular among them including

*Ours*, produced in 1866; *Caste*, produced in 1867; *Play*, first performed in 1868; *School*, produced in 1869, and *M. P.*, first performed in 1870. The last of his plays he would see to the stage, *War*, was produced at the St. James's Theatre in early 1871. Robertson died of heart disease on February 3, 1871, at the height of his career.

### Works in Literary Context

**Theatres Act of 1843** Robertson's dramatic writing was considered revolutionary in both style and subject matter. His "problem plays"—sensitive to the serious issues of Victorian people—moved theater toward a more realistic method of drama. Robertson was among the first English dramatists to benefit from the Theatres Act of 1843, which amended previous legislation that severely limited artistic freedom. In contrast to his contemporaries who, in spite of the act, did not stray from theatrical comedy and machine-made melodrama, Robertson took advantage of the new freedom afforded to playwrights and introduced naturalism into drama.

**Social Class Themes** Intended as entertainments for a middle-class audience, most of Robertson's plays are romantic comedies that treat social issues of the day in an idealized manner. Many concern issues of class: They satirize the pretensions of the aristocracy and the nouveau riche, and they ultimately uphold the values of the middle class.

*Society* (1865), for example, depicts a poor but honest man who achieves a title, property, and a seat in Parliament as the result of his moral character. His morality is sharply contrasted with that of the upper class, which is depicted as valuing only money and status. Similarly, in *Caste*, Robertson's best-known play, a young actress earns the respect and affection of her aristocratic husband's family by patiently enduring hardship and criticism. In other plays, Robertson depicted conflicts between the aristocracy, with its devotion to tradition, and the rising middle class, which favored social change.

**Realistic Style** Although conventional in sentiment, Robertson's plays were markedly different from those of his predecessors in terms of dialogue, characterization, and staging. These drawing-room dramas featured meticulous directions concerning details of staging and production, realistic characterization, and realistic dialogue.

Seeking to avoid the exaggeration and posturing of earlier Victorian acting methods, Robertson created characters that spoke in a realistic manner and provided his actors with elaborate directions concerning facial expression, hand gestures, and vocal intonation. Especially innovative, his dialogues are composed of short speeches that require the actors to address one another, thus avoiding the prevailing oratory style.

Robertson enhanced this dramatic realism by insisting on authenticity in his stage sets: he included furniture

and backdrops that clearly depicted the settings of his plays, and he made extensive use of props, including real food. Robertson's combination of stage realism with a focus on themes drawn from English life of the period is considered his most significant contribution to the English drama. His innovations prompted a trend which later culminated in the works of Henrik Ibsen, W. S. Gilbert, and George Bernard Shaw and are widely viewed as a significant contribution to the development of modern drama.

### Works in Critical Context

Robertson was recognized as one of the first English dramatists to bring timely social issues to the stage. Yet, the critics have been divided on his treatment of those issues. Some earlier critics judged his plays to be "cup-and-saucer comedies" and derided them for their absurd realism. These nineteenth-century critics bemoaned the commonplace representations and the realistic attention to physical detail. Others note that Robertson's treatment of common, everyday Victorian concerns was similar to that of earlier Romantic dramatists—his treatment relying too heavily upon the redeeming power of worthwhile sentiments.

Some critics, however, praised Robertson's attempt to mirror reality on the stage. His unique use of stage directions was appreciated by later playwrights, who acknowledged their debt to his innovations. W. S. Gilbert, for example, offered this tribute: "Most pieces are now stage-managed on the principles [Robertson] introduced. I look upon stage-management, as now understood, as having been absolutely invented by him."

Many earlier critics praised Robertson's contributions to dramatic production methods, yet did not see any literary value in the plays, which were rarely performed after the 1890s. In addition, the dramatic changes subsequently brought to the stage by such Realists as Ibsen and Shaw overshadowed the efforts of Robertson and many of his contemporaries. Recent scholarship, however, has brought renewed awareness of Robertson's contributions to the theater. William Tydeman echoes these modern sentiments: "[Robertson's] plays do convey something of the quality of everyday existence where meals are eaten, watches consulted, pipes smoked, peas shelled, half-crowns borrowed, and galoshes fetched.... In introducing even a hint of these factors into his pieces Robertson cautiously unbolted a door which bolder spirits were to fling wide."

**Critical Reaction to *Caste*** Contemporary critics such as John Oxenford applauded Robertson's *Caste*, comparing its quality with that of his other popular works. With regards to the reaction of Robertson's contemporaries to the work, Oxenford notes that "the success of *Caste* [was] indubitable." Writing in 1879, critic W. Wilding Jones agreed, saying that *Caste* was "in the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Robertson's plays often addressed differences in social status. Here are a few works by writers who have also considered the themes of social class and class values:

*An American Tragedy* (1925), a novel by Theodore Dreiser. This book explores the troubles of a young Clyde Griffiths, who is challenged by his relationships with both rich and poor girls.

*Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), a novel by Ivy Compton-Burnett. In this novel, English author Compton-Burnett examines the underbelly of the serving class, poking harsh and mocking fun at the classes the central characters serve.

*Where I'm Calling From* (1988), a short-story collection by Raymond Carver. This collection of contemporary short stories, set in the Pacific Northwest, involves the simple but miserable lives of common working-class Americans.

*The World of Malgudi* (2000), a collection of four short novels by R. K. Narayan. In this work, the author expresses the values and mores of domestic life and explores what it means to be East Indian in modern times.

opinion of many Robertson's *chef-d'œuvre* [masterwork], and in this opinion I concur." Later, George Bernard Shaw called Robertson's play "epoch making" and referred to Robertson's innovations as a "theatrical revolution." Modern scholars have recognized the play's popularity, and often cite it as an example of Robertson's innovations in realistic drama.

### Responses to Literature

1. While a playwright named Eugène Scribe is credited with creating the theatre genre known as the well-made play, Robertson was known as a playwright who met the conventions of that genre. Research the elements that make this kind of well-made play and match the list of criteria against one of Robertson's works. Report back to a group to discover Robertson's important techniques of action, characterization, and plot.
2. Go online to literary sites and databases and find one aspect of Victorian literature to investigate. This could be Victorian literary style, esteemed Victorian writers, lesser-known Victorian writers, publishing venues of the period, differences in the Victorian writing of other continents, or even the events and concerns that influenced Victorian themes. When you have printed out examples, return to share your new area of expertise with the group and discuss the

## Pierre de Ronsard

- influence of Victorian values or standards of behavior on Robertson's plays.
3. Besides appealing to a middle-class audience, Robertson's plays share common themes. Compare and contrast the themes in such plays as *Play*, *School*, and *M. P.* What do the similarities tell you about the audiences in Robertson's time? What, if anything, might still appeal to audiences today?
  4. Robertson was known for his innovations with the realistic "drawing-room drama." Research the genre, making careful note of what was required to produce such a play. Then, choosing a favorite Robertson work, create your own drawing-room drama. You might even decide to do a "cup-and-saucer comedy" by deciding on the characters to include in the scene, the right Victorian drawing-room drink and food to have as props, and the costumes and set you might use. Be prepared to also justify your choices—in context of how closely they imitate Victorian era, drawing-room culture.

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## Pierre de Ronsard

BORN: 1524, Couture-sur-Loir, France

DIED: 1585, Tours, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Amours de Cassandre* (1550)

*Odes of Pierre de Ronsard* (1552)

*La Franciade* (1572)



Pierre de Ronsard *Ronsard, Pierre de*, photograph. Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

## Overview

Pierre de Ronsard is considered by many scholars to be the greatest poet of the French Renaissance. He founded and led a small group of like-minded writers known first as the Brigade and later as the Pléiade who sought to create a French literature. Ronsard's body of literary works shaped French poetry long after his death, giving direction to the idealistic voices of the nineteenth-century romantics.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Prominent Family** Pierre de Ronsard was born at La Poissonnière on September 11, 1524, the youngest of the four surviving children of Jeanne Chaudrier and Louis de Ronsard. Jeanne was the daughter of a Poitevin family with ties to several prominent bloodlines of sixteenth-century France; Louis was a country gentleman whose distinction as a knight in the Italian campaigns of Charles VIII and Louis XII earned him the position of royal diplomat and maître d'hôtel. As Louis was frequently absent, Ronsard was strongly influenced by his relation with his cleric uncle, Jean de Ronsard. Thought to have played an important role in his nephew's earliest education, Jean de Ronsard was a writer of verses, and he possessed a substantial library to which Ronsard became heir upon his uncle's death.

In 1533 Ronsard left his home to receive formal instruction in Paris at the academically and religiously conservative Collège de Navarre. In spring 1534, after only one semester of study, the boy was peremptorily withdrawn from the school and returned to the paternal manor. This departure has been ascribed both to the young Ronsard's homesickness and to his father's fear that his son might become associated with the position taken by the college against the reformist leanings of the king's sister, Marguerite de Navarre.

**Cruel Fortune and the Inevitability of Death** Louis took advantage of his office in the royal household to secure his son a position as page to the dauphin Francis. A mere six days after joining Francis in the Rhône Valley, the dauphin died, and Ronsard, not yet twelve years old, found himself attending the prince's autopsy—an event he recalled, some thirty-nine years later, among the verses of his *Le Tombeau de tres-illustre Princesse Marguerite de France, Duchesse de Savoie* (1575; *Tomb for the Most Illustrious Princess, Marguerite de France, Duchess of Savoie*).

This shocking experience was followed by others. While in Lyon on October 7, 1536, Ronsard was witness, on orders from a vengeful Charles V, to the quartering of the dauphin's foreign-born squire, who was wrongly convicted of poisoning his master. On July 2, 1537, barely a month and a half after arriving in Scotland as a page in the service of Madeleine de France, Ronsard watched as the ravaging effects of tuberculosis, a highly contagious and often deadly disease, extinguished the lady's life

before she reached her seventeenth birthday. Biographers and literary critics have speculated that these encounters with human mortality at an early age account for the themes of cruel fortune and the inevitability of death throughout Ronsard's poetry.

**Career in Diplomacy Cut Short by Illness** Ronsard became a page in the royal house, where he attended briefly Francis I's eldest son and then the third son, Prince Charles. When James V of Scotland married Madeleine of France (1537), Charles gave the young page to his sister. Ronsard accompanied Scotland's new queen to her country but appears not to have stayed there more than a year.

During his travels abroad, Ronsard learned to speak English. He was eventually promoted from page to squire and assigned to military training. However, Ronsard's life took a different path after his return to France in August 1540. Struck by a high fever that permanently impaired his hearing, he had to abandon his pursuit for a military career and retreat to La Possonnière. The three-year convalescence afforded him an opportunity to deepen his admiration for the natural beauty of the French countryside and to peruse his uncle Jean's library. The result was an awakening to his inner calling, a discovery that led to his decision to write.

**A New Direction** By early 1543 Ronsard had recovered from his fever and was confronted with supporting himself in his new vocation. The surest option for a gentleman of the day in his situation was to enter the church. In March 1543 Ronsard was tonsured, or had his head shaved in the manner of those entering the priesthood. The act did not make the future poet a priest, but it did permit him to receive income from certain ecclesiastical posts—potentially an important source of revenue, and one he would exploit.

With the deaths of his father in June 1544 and his mother in January 1545, Ronsard found the independence to devote greater attention to his poetic ambitions. Especially valuable was the time he began dedicating to his studies under the eminent Hellenist, Jean Daurat, a scholar whose analyses of Homer captured the imagination of Ronsard and his fellow pupils. When Daurat became principal of the Collège de Coqueret in 1547, he took his pupils with him. The students followed a strict but enlightened discipline that brought them into intimate contact with the languages, forms, and techniques of the ancient poets. In this way, the nucleus of that school of French poets known as the Pléiade was formed.

**Prince of Poets** Ronsard's first works inscribe his fascination with the lore of antiquity as evidenced in poems such as "Song of Folly to Bacchus" and "The Deflowering of Leda." During the following years, Ronsard continued to expand his poetic portfolio. In January 1550, the twenty-five-year-old Ronsard published his first major

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Ronsard's famous contemporaries include:

**Henry II of France** (1519–1559): Succeeding Francis I,

Henry II ruled as king of France from 1547 until his death. Under his rule, France warred with Austria and persecuted the Protestant Huguenots for heresy.

**James V of Scotland** (1512–1542): During his rule as the king of Scots, he married Madeleine de Valois, the daughter of Francis I of France. This was made possible by his renewal of the Auld Alliance with France.

**François Rabelais** (1494–1553): An avant-garde author of the French Renaissance, Rabelais influenced many modern writers including Jonathan Swift, Milan Kundera, and Anatole France.

**Jean Daurat** (1508–1588): This French poet and scholar was named “The King’s Poet” by King Charles IX and held membership in the group La Pléiade with Pierre de Ronsard.

**Jean-Antoine de Baïf** (1532–1589): Although nearly a decade younger than Ronsard, Baïf was able to assist him in his use of Greek during their shared membership in La Pléiade.

**Jacques Peletier du Mans** (1517–1582): As an accomplished poet, mathematician, and humanist of the French Renaissance, Mans played a significant role in encouraging Pierre de Ronsard in his literary endeavors.

work, *The Odes of Pierre Ronsard* (1550). Ronsard was determined to open his career brilliantly and chose to imitate the long, difficult odes of Pindar written in praise of Olympic heroes. The subjects of Ronsard’s odes are the royal family and court dignitaries, but the length and difficulty remain.

Ronsard’s next major accomplishment came in 1552 with the *Amours*. Ronsard attempted to prove his ability to rival yet another great poet, Petrarch (1304–1374). Some of the sonnets seemed to be obscure and poorly constructed. In 1553, Ronsard published a second edition of *Amours*, hoping to improve reception by elucidating the obscure literary and mythological references that had frustrated readers of the initial version.

Ronsard’s success and productivity grew considerably in the three-year period from 1554 through 1556. Notable among the pieces of the 1554 *Bocage* are the ode “A Pierre de Pascal,” presenting an autobiography of the Pléiade leader through 1550. The last major work Ronsard published, in the fall of 1555, was *Hymns*.

**Return to the Court** Though Ronsard continued writing, he returned to the court in the 1560s, serving Charles IX and Marguerite. In addition to filling his

duties as a royal poet, Ronsard was able to publish new versions of his existing collections, reorganizing the order, revising old poems, and adding new pieces.

During the final eight years of his life, Ronsard was markedly less engaged in matters of the court. His diminished presence in society notwithstanding, during the months following the appearance of the fifth edition of *Amours*, Ronsard’s praises were enthusiastically sung by several writers of the new generation, including Henri III’s secretary, Clovis Hesteau, and the Angevin poet, Pierre Le Loyer. In September 1584, Ronsard even began work on a seventh edition of *Amours*. The “prince of poets, poet of princes” died in his bed on December 27, 1585.

### Works in Literary Context

Inspired by the lessons of contemporary classicists, such as Jean Daurat, Ronsard set out to break away from the stale conventions of his contemporaries by infusing his verse with the spirit, wisdom, and mythological legacy of antiquity. That influence fueled experiments with major and minor ancient genres ranging from the ode to the dithyramb; moreover, supported by the theories of poets such as Horace and Virgil, it emboldened him to ascribe a potential prophetic quality to verse.

Antiquity was not the only source of Ronsard’s creative flow. He also drew upon the writings of early modern Italian and neo-Latin poets such as Francesco Petrarch and Michael Marullus. The result was a voluminous corpus of poetry as diverse as the worlds Ronsard aspired to represent—a body of literary works that shaped French poetry for decades after his death and gave direction to the idealistic voices of the nineteenth-century romantics. His works provide literary critics and cultural historians of today with insight into the dominant aesthetic, philosophical, and social concerns of France during the second half of the sixteenth century.

### Works in Critical Context

During his lifetime, Ronsard’s work received an incredibly positive reaction from his contemporaries. However, toward the end of his life and, more so, after his death, his work became increasingly disliked and eventually fell into obscurity for a period of several hundred years. Then, in the nineteenth century, his work reentered scholarly debate and grew in popularity well into the twentieth century, rebuilding the reputation he lost in the intervening years between his death and present day.

**The Amours of 1552** With *Amours de Cassandre* (1552), Ronsard attempted to prove his ability to rival another great Italian poet, Petrarch. Indeed, the *Amours*, addressed to Cassandra (identified as a Cassandra Salviati), so seek to capture the traits of the Italian’s famous love poems to Laura that the existence of a woman

named Cassandra at that time must be considered as incidental. Poetry in the sixteenth century was an affair of imitation and skill but rarely biography. The sonnets, in decasyllabic verse, are highly conventional, and although some critics find an appealing baroque quality in certain of them, many poems are so obscure, poorly constructed, and basely derivative that even Ronsard's contemporaries found fault with them. Other, modern critics have been kinder; J. Middleton Murray, writing in 1919, asserted, "It would be hard to find in the whole of ... *Les Amours* a single piece which has not its sufficient charge of gusto." Scholar I. D. McFarlane, writing in 1974, notes that in the *Amours* "some of Ronsard's major qualities are already present: a fine gift of organising imagery, a mastery of rhythms, with timely *enjambements* and an acute sense of the links between metrical and sentence structure, an ability to communicate a feeling of vital force."

## Responses to Literature

1. Discuss the reception of Ronsard's poetry in the sixteenth century. Why was his work controversial? How does this compare to the literary controversies of today?
2. Read several of Ronsard's sonnets aloud. Discuss what the speaker is saying about love. What attitudes about love have changed since Ronsard wrote these sonnets?
3. Compare and contrast Ronsard's sonnets of 1578 with those of 1552 in terms of their style and emotional impact on you, the reader.
4. In addition to writing poetry, Ronsard also wrote essays for the court, providing opinions about politics, religion, and nationality. Read his address, *Remonstrance*, and discuss Ronsard's attitude towards Calvinism. What is his stance on the principles of "one king, one law, and one faith"?

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## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Foremost among Ronsard's themes is the importance of acting or seizing the moment. He often uses imagery representative of the human life cycle in order to emphasize the inevitability of death. Other works that explore this theme include:

- "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (1648), a poem by Robert Herrick. In this poem, Herrick emphasizes the *carpe diem* or seize the day, theme with his opening line "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may."
- "To His Coy Mistress" (1649–1660, exact date unknown), a poem by Andrew Marvell. This work is often cited as a literary argument to *carpe diem*.
- Twelfth Night* (1601), a play by William Shakespeare. The song "O Mistress Mine" is sung by a clown in the second act of this famous play; its content is interpreted to be in the spirit of seizing the day.

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## Christina Rossetti

BORN: 1830, London

DIED: 1894, London

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry, fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Verses* (1847)

*Goblin Market, and Other Poems* (1862)

*The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems* (1866)

*Commonplace, and Other Stories* (1870)

*A Pageant, and Other Poems* (1881)

## Overview

One of the English language's best-known female poets, British author Christina Rossetti is remembered for her literary inheritance as much as for her literary contributions. Rossetti, whose work gained renewed interest with the dawn of feminist criticism, was an important member of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, an artistic and literary



Christina Rossetti Hulton Archive / Getty Images

group that aspired to recapture the aesthetics of Italian religious painting before the Renaissance painter Raphael. In her exploration of themes including death, female creativity, sisterhood, and unrequited love, Rossetti became the voice of Victorian womanhood. Her work is now celebrated as much for its innovation and beauty as for its feminine perspective.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Born into Artistic Family** Christina Georgina Rossetti was born on December 5, 1830, in London, England. The daughter of a half-Italian mother and an Italian poet father, Rossetti was encouraged to indulge in the family passions for language, poetry, and art. She had a distinctly artistic family: her two older brothers, William Michael and Dante Gabriel, were active in literary circles of the time, and Maria, her sister, was a published author.

As a girl, Rossetti was educated at home by her mother, who blended a love of learning with devout religious beliefs, introducing her daughter to literary works in the tradition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). Rossetti's Anglo-Catholic faith colored the remainder of her life. Equally influential were her parents' efforts to subdue her high-spirited, fiery personality.

**Began Writing Poetry** In love with words and influenced by dramatic novels and legends such as *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights* (c. 800), Rossetti began writing poetry by age eleven, collaborating with her siblings on a family magazine and developing other artistic interests. When Rossetti's father, an exiled poet and Dante Alighieri scholar, was forced to resign from his teaching position due to ill health, Rossetti and her siblings contributed whatever they could to the family income. In this time in Great Britain, there were limited career choices for respectable women, with teaching as a governess the most common. Rossetti, however, devoted herself to writing for extra money, remaining at home with her ailing father while her sister, brother, and mother worked outside the home.

**Ill Health** The family's financial situation continued to be dismal between 1843 and 1848, when Rossetti herself physically collapsed. The reason for her decline in health has never been fully explained and continues to interest historians. One of these scholars, Jan Marsh, has suggested that Rossetti was sexually abused by her father during his illness, leading to her attempt to escape her family obligations through the life of an invalid. Whether or not this was the cause of her health problems, Rossetti remained in delicate health for the rest of her life.

**First Publications** Rossetti had collected over fifty poems by the age of sixteen, thirty-nine of which were privately printed as *Verses* in 1847. Encouraged by her brothers, Rossetti sought wider publication and began to experiment with a blend of allegory and fantasy. Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel was involved in the growing Pre-Raphaelite movement—in which artists, testing and often defying all conventions of art, emphasized eroticized medievalism with symbolism that produced a moody atmosphere—and Rossetti followed his lead, even sitting for portraits in the Pre-Raphaelite style and experimenting with medieval themes.

Preoccupied with religious questions, Rossetti continued to write poetry, even venturing into prose for her 1850 novel *Maude: A Story for Girls*, which was published after her death. Meanwhile, her family's fortunes continued to suffer. By the time her father died in April 1854, she was dependent on her brother William for support.

Around this time, Rossetti volunteered at an institution for fallen women (such as prostitutes, unmarried mothers, and homeless women), where she became interested in the fates of women with compromised morals, a subject she explored in her later poetry. The Victorian era in England, so named because of its long-serving monarch, Queen Victoria, was marked by a spirit of reform and social justice. Reform laws of the period enfranchised the new middle class and the working class, while humanitarian legislation did away with some of the more outrageous abuses of the poor and improved conditions for

those who worked in factories. The reformation of fallen women was part of such concerns.

**Literary Fame** Though some of her poems were published in magazines during the 1850s, most of Rossetti's work was not commercially published until 1862, when her most famous work, *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*, appeared. The book's namesake, "Goblin Market," is a long poem that depicts two sisters' struggle with teasing goblins who drive them mad with forbidden fruit. The poem has become Rossetti's most famous, drawing feminist, Marxist, social, and psychoanalytic analyses from various critics. Other poems in the collection grapple with questions of vulnerability, femininity, and sisterhood. *Goblin Market, and Other Poems* gained Rossetti fame and praise and has remained popular due to its skill and subject matter.

Its publication did not interrupt Rossetti's life. In the years following the publication of *Goblin Market, and Other Poems*, she turned down her second marriage proposal on religious grounds, recovered from a lung disease later thought to be tuberculosis (a contagious lung disease that was often fatal at that time), and began work on her next collection. *The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems* appeared in 1866 with illustrations provided by her brother Dante Gabriel. Her next work, *Commonplace, and Other Short Stories* (1870), marked her first experiments with short fiction. Though the book of sophisticated literary fairy tales failed commercially, critics still find stories like "Nick" and "Hero" notable.

**Popular Books for Children** After battling Graves' disease, an autoimmune disease that causes overactivity of the thyroid gland, Rossetti was weak and exhausted. Nevertheless, she kept writing, this time producing a book of children's poetry called *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872). The book, which was accompanied by Pre-Raphaelite illustrations by Arthur Hughes, is considered one of the most significant works of nineteenth-century children's verse. Spurred on by the book's popularity, Rossetti next published *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), a collection of warped, terrifying fairy tales.

Though many critics dismiss *A Pageant, and Other Poems* (1881) as one of Rossetti's weakest works, the book represented a break for Rossetti. In her "Monna Innominata" love sonnets, Rossetti explored love with a sense of regret and sadness that some consider to be characteristic of Victorian womanhood. (During the Victorian era, there were many pressures placed on women to live up to an impossible ideal.) As a woman writing in a field dominated by men, Rossetti explored love in unconventional ways, combining questions about romance with speculation about a romantic union with God.

**Later Life and Death** Rossetti, who had always combined her literary output with religious devotion, became even more committed to spiritual service during her later years. After acting as caretaker to her sickly

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rossetti's famous contemporaries include:

**Elizabeth Barrett Browning** (1806–1861): British poet who was known for her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850).

**William Holman Hunt** (1827–1910): British painter who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His paintings include *The Light of the World* (1853–1854).

**Abraham Lincoln** (1809–1865): American politician who served as the sixteenth American president during the American Civil War.

**Emily Dickinson** (1830–1886): American poet who was reclusive and employed unconventional dashes, capitalization, and broken rhyming rhythm in her work. Her complete and mostly unaltered poems were first collected in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1955).

**Nellie Bly** (1864–1922): American journalist who was known for her sensationalistic work, including an undercover exposé in which she faked a mental illness to study a mental institution from the inside.

**Anne Sullivan** (1866–1936): American educator known for her work with the blind and deaf Helen Keller.

relatives, she turned her mind to religious writing, continuing to pray and attend church services daily. In 1892, Rossetti was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy. The cancer recurred the next year, and, after months of suffering, she died on December 29, 1894.

### Works in Literary Context

Rossetti has long been considered one of the Victorian era's most important female poets. She drew inspiration from the religious writing of such poets as Dante and Milton, as well as influenced writers as diverse as Algernon Charles Swinburne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Charlotte Mew, Virginia Woolf, and e. e. cummings. Aligned with the Pre-Raphaelite movement during her lifetime, Rossetti was considered to be one of her age's greatest poets and was praised as England's new female laureate when Elizabeth Barrett Browning died in the 1860s. While readers have generally judged Rossetti's poetry to be less political and intellectual than that of Barrett Browning, they do recognize Rossetti as the more talented lyricist, her poetry displaying precision in diction, form, and tone.

**Pre-Raphaelite Connections** While Rossetti was closely aligned with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, her work differs from theirs in several key ways. First of all,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rossetti's writings for children retold popular fairy tales in imaginatively different ways. Here is a list of other fairy tales, legends, and children's stories that have been reworked from diverse perspectives:

- The Penelopiad* (2005), a novella by Margaret Atwood. Atwood retells the events of the Greek epic the *Odyssey* from the point of view of Odysseus's wife Penelope.
- Grendel* (1971), a novel by John Gardner. In this novel, Gardner retells the Anglo-Saxon story of Beowulf the warrior from the point of view of Grendel, one of the "monsters" that Beowulf fights.
- Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), a novel by Gregory Maguire. This novel presents the story of the early life of the Wicked Witch of the West of *The Wizard of Oz* (1900).
- Enchanted* (2007), a film directed by Kevin Lima. Through the story about a modern-day princess's search for love in New York City, this movie satirizes traditional "beautiful princess" interpretations of fairy tales.
- The Stinky Cheese Man, and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992), a collection of stories by Jon Scieszka. This assortment of fractured fairy tales is filled with sarcastic humor.

Rossetti's deep religious convictions diverged from those of Pre-Raphaelite artists and writers. Second, her use of fantastical elements clashed with the realism embraced by the Pre-Raphaelites. Furthermore, Rossetti's style is almost deceptively simple. She favored nursery rhymes and fairy tales, filling them with complex symbolism and allegorical elements. In spite of these artistic variations, Rossetti remained close to the Pre-Raphaelites for much of her life.

**Religious Connections** Having faced several serious illnesses during her lifetime, Rossetti often believed she was close to death, and her work reflects themes of both religious devotion and mortality. For example, she wrote the prose piece *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892) after she recovered from Graves' disease. Although critics often claim that her religious prose is inferior to her verse, Rossetti's strong faith inspired some of her finest poetry.

Religious conviction controlled Rossetti's personal life as well as her writing. As a young woman, she rejected two separate marriage proposals because the men's beliefs did not conform to the tenets of the Anglican Church. In the sonnet sequence "Monna Innominata," included in *A Pageant, and Other Poems*, she explores the denial of human love for the sake of religious purity.

**Feminist Connections** Though Rossetti was unsure about her own positions regarding women's suffrage and feminism, her subject matter focuses extensively on issues of sisterhood, sexual oppression, and gender roles, making her one of the most important feminists of the nineteenth century. The revival of interest in Rossetti's work during the feminist movement of the 1970s introduced her ideas to a new generation of writers.

## Works in Critical Context

Rossetti's poetry and stories enjoyed critical success during her lifetime, earning her comparisons with eminent female poets of the day such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One reviewer in the October 1876 *Catholic World* called her the "queen of the Preraphaelite school." However, more recent critics have remarked that the Pre-Raphaelite elements in Rossetti's work have been overemphasized.

Rossetti's literary reputation declined as modernist works gained more popularity. After fading into relative obscurity throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Rossetti's literary reputation was restored once her work was rediscovered by feminist critics. These critics appreciated Rossetti's honesty about a woman's place in Victorian society, her social commitment to fallen women, and her attention to issues of sisterhood and gender identity. Largely because of feminist critiques of her work, Rossetti has been restored to the canon of important Victorian-era poets.

**Goblin Market, and Other Poems** Rossetti's 1862 poem "Goblin Market" is her most famous work. Featuring a nursery-rhyme style and a ghoulish story of temptation, seduction, and salvation, the poem has gained attention for its exploration of sisterhood (feminist critiques), its sexual content (psychological critiques), its exploration of fallen women (social and cultural critiques), and even its vision of women as goods in a marketplace (Marxist critiques). It appeared to general praise, garnering a reputation as a work of literary genius and receiving wide attention in the newspapers and literary journals of its time.

Today, critics ignore Rossetti's insistence that she intended no allegorical meaning in "Goblin Market" and offer a range of interpretations for the two sisters' responses to the temptation of the goblin fruit. Some read the work as a moral allegory of temptation, indulgence, sacrifice, and salvation. The poem has also been approached from a specifically Christian viewpoint, with its reenactment of the temptation in the Garden of Eden and a Christlike offer of redemption through sacrifice.

Feminist interpretations of "Goblin Market" focus on its image of sisterhood, while psychoanalytic readings consider the sisters as two aspects of one psyche and emphasize the poem's sexuality. Marxist critics call attention to the separation of domestic and commercial areas and to the sisters' attempts to do business in a market system that regards women as exchangeable objects.

Other scholars have seen Lizzie's redemption of Laura as a direct critique of the Victorian cultural view of the fallen woman.

## Responses to Literature

1. Rossetti's deep religious sentiments affected not only her work, but also her life; so much so that she spurned two romantic relationships. Research the primary characteristics of the Anglo-Catholic revival practiced by Rossetti and her family. Write an essay in which you share your findings, while also addressing how your spiritual beliefs affect the friendships you have.
2. Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is her most famous piece of poetry, earning her comparisons with another eminent female poet of the day, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Using your library and the Internet, write a paper about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life and poetry.
3. Rossetti's work was largely forgotten throughout the twentieth century. However, the dawn of feminist criticism brought a revitalized interest in her work. What facets of feminist criticism might be responsible for this renewed interest? Create a presentation with your findings.
4. The figure of Dante Alighieri was influential in Rossetti's family. Her father was an important scholar of Italian literature, and every one of her siblings went through a Dante phase. If you were a writer, who would be your most important literary influence? Write a response paper to this question.
5. Rossetti is known for presenting complex ideas through seemingly simple fairy tales. Reinterpret your favorite fairy tale in short-story form.

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## Dante Gabriel Rossetti

BORN: 1828, London, England

DIED: 1882, Birchington, Kent, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Poems* (1869)

*Ballads and Sonnets* (1881)

## Overview

Equally renowned as a painter and a poet, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of artists and writers who sought to emulate the purity and simplicity of the medieval period. Both his painting and writing are characterized by mysticism, filled with rich, sensuous imagery and vivid detail. Although the subjects of his verse are often considered narrow, Rossetti is an acknowledged master of the ballad and sonnet forms.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Bilingual Childhood** Born Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti on May 12, 1828, in London, the eldest son of



Dante Gabriel Rossetti © Hulton-Deutsch Collection / CORBIS

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rossetti's famous contemporaries include:

- Henry David Thoreau** (1817–1862): American author and naturalist best known for his writings on philosophy and natural history.
- Ford Madox Brown** (1821–1893): English painter known for his distinctively graphic style and the moral and historical nature of his subjects.
- Jules Verne** (1828–1905): French author who pioneered the genre of science fiction with such books as *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864).
- Henrik Ibsen** (1828–1906): Norwegian playwright who is often credited with contributing to the rise of modern realistic drama. He wrote such dramas as *A Doll's House* (1879).
- John Everett Millais** (1829–1896): English painter and illustrator who served as president of the Royal Academy.
- William Morris** (1834–1896): English artist, writer, and socialist who was one of the founders of the British Arts and Crafts movement.

Gabriele Rossetti and his wife, Frances Polidori. An Italian expatriate, Rossetti's father came to England four years before Rossetti's birth. Gabriele Rossetti was a Dante scholar, who had been exiled from Naples for writing poetry in support of the Neapolitan Constitution of 1819. (Secret groups such as the Carbonari, who supported the constitution sought to bring self-government to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies—which included Naples—in place of the Austrian-backed monarch, Ferdinand, but failed.) He settled in London in 1824. Frances Polidori had trained as a governess and supervised her children's early education. Gabriele Rossetti supported the family as a professor of Italian at King's College, London, until his eyesight and general health deteriorated in the 1840s. Frances then attempted to support the family as a teacher of French and Italian and an unsuccessful founder of two day schools.

Consequently, Rossetti was bilingual from early childhood and grew up in an atmosphere of émigré political and literary discussion. From childhood, Rossetti intended to be a painter, and he addressed literary subjects in his earliest drawings. He was tutored at home in German and read the Bible, Shakespeare, Goethe's *Faust*, *The Arabian Nights*, Charles Dickens, and the poetry of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron. At the age of eight, he entered Mr. Paul's day school in Portland Place and a year later began studies at King's College School, which he attended from 1837 to 1842.

From 1842 to 1846, Rossetti was a student at Cary's Academy of Art to prepare for the Royal Academy, which he entered in July 1846. He then spent a year in the Academy Antique School. By this time, Great Britain was well into the reign of Queen Victoria, a time of economic prosperity, expansion of the middle class, and a cultural revival often called the second English Renaissance. The theater, literature, and arts were particularly emphasized, drawing on the Gothic and classical ideals as well as modern ideas.

**The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood** After leaving school, Rossetti apprenticed himself to the historical painter Ford Madox Brown, who later became his closest lifelong friend. Rossetti continued his extensive reading of poetry (Edgar Allan Poe, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, Robert Browning, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson) and romantic and satiric fiction (Charles Maturin, William Makepeace Thackeray, Wilhelm Meinhold, Friedrich de la Motte-Fouqué, Charles Wells). In 1845, Rossetti began translations from Italian (Dante's *Vita Nuova* and British Museum volumes of Dante's little-known predecessors) and German medieval poetry.

In 1848, Rossetti joined John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt in founding the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Their name honored Carlo Lasinio's engravings of paintings by Benozzo Gozzoli (an Italian Renaissance painter from Florence) and others who decorated Pisa's Campo Santo (originally used as a cemetery for Pisa's illustrious citizens). The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood sought to introduce new forms of thematic seriousness, high coloration, and attention to detail into contemporary British art. They were opposed to the stale conventions of contemporary academy art, which drew on classical poses and the compositions of the Italian High Renaissance painter Raphael.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers provided each other with companionship, criticism, and encouragement early in their careers and defended each other against initial public hostility. Rossetti quickly became the leader of the group and shaped the group's literary tastes, but the life of the group was short-lived. Meetings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood became sporadic by 1851, and by 1853 the group had disbanded. It had served its purpose, however, which was to provide initial professional encouragement to its members.

**Success as a Poet** Rossetti first received recognition as a poet in 1850, when he published "The Blessed Damozel" in the Pre-Raphaelite journal the *Germ*. Written when he was only eighteen, this poem is characteristic of much of Rossetti's later poetry, with its sensuous detail and theme of lovers, parted by death, who long for reunion. That same year, Rossetti met Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, who modeled for many of Rossetti's drawings and paintings and became his wife in 1860.

Rossetti painted steadily, saw publication of his *The Early Italian Poets*, and cofounded the firm of designers

Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Co. His wife suffered from consumption (a popular name for tuberculosis, a contagious lung disease that was common in this period), and after two unhappy years of marriage, she died from an overdose of laudanum (an opium-based pain killer regularly prescribed by doctors in Victorian England), which she had been taking regularly for her illness. In a fit of remorse and guilt, Rossetti buried the only manuscript of his poems with his wife. At the urging of friends, he allowed the manuscript to be exhumed in 1869.

The following year, Rossetti published *Poems*, (1869) which established his reputation as a leading poet. Containing much of Rossetti's finest work, *Poems* includes "Eden Bower," "The Stream's Secret," and "Sister Helen," which is regarded by many as one of the finest Victorian literary ballads.

**Decline and Death** By 1868, Rossetti was in ill health, suffering from physical and mental complaints that burdened him for the rest of his life. His unreliable eyesight, headaches, and insomnia led him to become dependent on whiskey and chloral (a depressant drug developed in the 1830s specifically for inducing sleep). This precipitated a gradual decline in health, though he continued to paint and write even after a personal change and mental breakdown caused by an attack on his poetry by Robert Buchanan in *The Fleshy School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (1872). Rossetti's poetry collection, *Ballads and Sonnets*, appeared in 1881, and he died the following year at the age of fifty-four.

## Works in Literary Context

**Painting to Poetry** The dual nature of Rossetti's artistic endeavors led to crossover between them. Just as his literary background influenced his choice of mythological, allegorical, and literary subjects for his paintings, his Pre-Raphaelite love of detail, color, and mysticism shaped much of his poetry. The influence of Rossetti's painting is particularly felt throughout *Poems*.

**Evolution of Style and Theme** It is difficult to date Rossetti's work or to divide it into periods, since he continually revised poems begun as a young man. Nonetheless, some divisions are possible. When Rossetti was young, his bright pictorialism, concrete detail, archaisms, and sublimated sexuality reflected rather conventional aspects of contemporary poetic sensibility. By the late 1860s, his sense of failure had evolved into an oppressive fear about identity. In Rossetti's middle and later poetry, sexual love became a near-desperate desire to transcend time. By comparison, the final sonnets of Rossetti's life are tranquil, even celebratory.

His writings can perhaps best be viewed as an expression of Victorian social uncertainty and loss of faith. Rossetti's poetry on the absence of love is as bleakly despairing as any of the century, and no poet of his period conveyed more profoundly certain central Victorian anxieties: metaphysical uncertainty, sexual anxiety, and fear of time.

**Influence on Other Writers and Artists** It is also difficult to compare Rossetti's achievement with that of the other Victorian poets. For its modest size, Rossetti's poetic work is wide in manner and subject. He was a talented experimenter, and his heightened rhythms and refrains influenced other mid- and late nineteenth-century poetry. He was also an important popularizer of Italian poetry in England and a major practitioner of the sonnet. Certainly, he lacked the strong, confident range and subtle lyricism of Tennyson and Browning, but his erotic spirituality and gift for the dramatic were his own. Rossetti was perhaps as significant for his effect on others as for his own work, a judgment that he himself came to make with growing bitterness. His critical remarks on Romantic and contemporary literature were often convincing and influenced all around him.

Rossetti's attempt to create a unified composition of poetry and painting was also pioneering and extended conceptions of both arts. Through such painters as Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Sandys, and John William Waterhouse, Rossetti had a further indirect influence on the literature of the Decadence. He also conceived the idea of the *Germ*, the first little magazine of literature and art, and with Ford Madox Brown, William Morris, Burne-Jones, and Philip Webb helped cofound the movement to extend the range of decorative art and improve the quality of book design. Rossetti's poetry is not as important as that of Tennyson, Browning, or Gerard Manley Hopkins, but it would be difficult to name others who clearly surpassed him at his best and even more difficult to imagine later nineteenth-century Victorian poetry and art without his influence.

## Works in Critical Context

**Poems** Following the publication of *Poems*, numerous reviews appeared praising Rossetti as the greatest poet since Shakespeare. However, in 1871, critic Robert Buchanan pseudonymously published a venomous attack against Rossetti, in which he claimed that Rossetti's only artistic aim was "to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense."

Rossetti published a convincing reply called "The Stealthy School of Criticism." Buchanan then expanded his views in *The Fleshy School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*. In this work, he added a lengthy attack on "The House of Life" as a "hotbed" of "nasty phrases," which virtually "wheel[ed]" the poet's "nuptial couch into the public streets."

Almost all the reviews of Rossetti's *Poems* were favorable, and the book sold unusually well. Few in Rossetti's actual or potential audience were likely to share Buchanan's extreme prudery. Rossetti was deeply proud

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rossetti's poetry is characterized by its mysticism, its rich and sensuous imagery, and its vivid detail. Here are some other works which have similar themes:

*Idylls of the King* (1856–1885), poems by Alfred Tennyson. This cycle of twelve narrative poems retells the legend of King Arthur with vibrant descriptions of nature derived from the author's own observations of his surroundings.

*The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820), by John Keats. This long poem tells the story of Madeline and Porphyro, whose romance "falls" from innocence to experience.

*American Primitive* (1984), poems by Mary Oliver. This Pulitzer Prize-winning collection allows the reader to devour luscious objects and substances through powerful recurring images of ingestion.

*The Burning Alphabet* (2005), poems by Barry Dempster. This collection combines a sense of humor with sensuous writing.

of the originality of his best work, and his friends admired his work, as well. William Morris wrote in the *Academy* of his friend's work:

To conclude, I think these lyrics, with all their other merits, the most *complete* of their time; no difficulty is avoided in them: no subject is treated vaguely, languidly, or heartlessly; as there is no commonplace or second-hand thought left in them to be atoned for by beauty of execution, so no thought is allowed to overshadow that beauty of art which compels a real poet to speak in verse and not in prose. Nor do I know what lyrics of any time are to be called great if we are to deny that title to these.

Critics have differed in assessing the quality of Rossetti's poetic achievement and in their preferences for different periods of his work. Following his death, Rossetti's works suffered somewhat from critical neglect. However, with the renewed interest in Pre-Raphaelitism, numerous studies have appeared. Rossetti is now recognized as a distinguished artist and verbal craftsman.

### Responses to Literature

1. The Pre-Raphaelite Brothers (PRB) was an important group that helped launch Rossetti's career. Using the Internet and your library resources to research the goals and objectives of the PRB, write a bulleted list outlining your results.
2. Rossetti was criticized by some contemporaries for focusing on physical attributes rather than the soul. Would Rossetti's poems draw similar criticism today?

In small groups, discuss the subject matter in Rossetti's poems and explain how his poems would be critiqued by modern society.

3. Rossetti was explicit about being influenced by poets and artists from an earlier time. Write an essay reflecting on your own artistic and literary influences.
4. The sonnet was one of Rossetti's favored poetic forms. Write a sonnet that describes a moment of peace and silence that you have had. Include details that you observed while being quiet.

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### Edmond Rostand

BORN: 1868, Marseilles, France

DIED: 1918, Paris, France

NATIONALITY: French

GENRE: Drama, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Romancers* (1894)

*Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897)

*Chantecler* (1910)

### Overview

That Edmond Rostand is still known throughout the world today is due almost solely to his much-loved play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). Since its first performance,



Edmond Rostand Branger / Roger Viollet / Getty Images

*Cyrano de Bergerac* has been translated from its original French into many languages, including English, Spanish, Russian, and Hebrew, making its long-nosed title character beloved worldwide. Rostand wrote at the end of the nineteenth century and is credited with briefly reviving the popularity of romance and heroism on a turn-of-the-century French stage dominated by realism.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Stellar Student** Rostand was born in Marseilles, France, on April 1, 1868, to wealthy parents. His father was the prominent economist Eugene Rostand, a member of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences of Marseilles and the Institut de France, who wrote poems and translated the works of the ancient Roman lyric poet Gaius Valerius Catullus. His aunt Victorine Rostand wrote poetry, and his uncle Alexis Rostand was a composer and music critic. Living with a literary and musical family, it is not surprising that Edmond was recognized for his talent as a translator and poet as early as the age of sixteen, while studying at the Lycée Marseilles. When he continued his studies at the Collège Stanislas in Paris from 1884 to 1886, he was considered the best student in French composition, history, and philosophy.

Following a brilliant academic career, Rostand made efforts to please his father by studying law in Paris for two years, but these attempts to prepare for the legal profession were secondary to his growing literary interests. During the time of his legal studies, Rostand won the 1887 literary essay competition held by the Marseilles Academy for an essay that he had written on Honoré d'Urfé and Guy de Maupassant. In 1888 Rostand's first play, *Le Gant rouge* (*The Red Glove*), written in collaboration with Henry Lee, was performed at the Cluny Theater, but it did not meet with much success. Rostand also began to write a collection of poetry that he published in 1890 under the title *Les Musardises* (*Daydreams*).

**Marriage, Success, and an Early Death** In 1890 Rostand married Rosemonde Gérard, to whom he dedicated *Les Musardises*. Rosemonde, herself a poet, was a great and harmonious influence on Rostand. Her collection of poems, *Fibs*, received special mention from the Académie Française. After the wedding, however, Rosemonde dedicated herself to her husband's career and often helped him work through difficult passages, lending her poetic sensibilities to his. Many years after Rostand's death, Rosemonde wrote a memoir-biography of her beloved husband, *Edmond Rostand* (1935).

The decade of the 1890s was a period of great success, both personal and professional, for Rostand. During a four-year period beginning in 1893, he wrote and produced an incredible succession of dramatic works: *The Romancers* (1894), *The Princess Far-Away* (1895), *The Woman of Samaria* (1897), and *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

He retired to his country estate, and in 1901 he was elected to the Académie Française, the youngest member ever inducted. Rostand published a third volume of poems, *The Flight of the Marseillaise*, in 1914, which has been dismissed by most as unredeemed sentimental patriotism. Rostand probably saw writing these poems as his duty because his health prevented him from serving France in World War I. He reportedly often visited the trenches, however, wanting to see the suffering and devastation, even though it distressed him greatly and added to his decline in health. He continued to write plays and poetry when his health permitted, leaving his final play, *The Last Night of Don Juan*, unfinished at the time of his death. Rostand died of pneumonia in Paris on December 2, 1918.

### Works in Literary Context

When Rostand's plays first appeared, some critics believed that they would inspire a return to verse drama and romanticism. However, his dramas merely stood in contrast to the naturalist and symbolist literary movements of his time, rather than causing them to be supplanted. Recent evaluators of Rostand's work have praised his skillful verse and consummate theatricality but find that his plays lack the thematic complexity and depth necessary to be considered great. Nevertheless, his dramas, particularly *Cyrano de Bergerac*, have maintained their popularity and continue to be performed to enthusiastic reviews.

**Romance and Courtly Love** In his first play, *The Romancers*, Rostand rejected the sordid realism of the naturalistic plays then in fashion, creating a lighthearted satire about two young lovers in search of romance and adventure who discover that romantic love can exist without the excitement of danger or obstacles to overcome. Rostand further developed the theme of courtly love in *The Princess Far-Away*, which relates the story of the troubadour Joffroy Rudel, Prince of Blaye, whose love for the Countess of Tripoli, whom he has never seen, inspires him to travel to see her before he dies. In this play, Rostand introduced the theme of tenacious

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rostand's famous contemporaries include:

- Henry James** (1843–1916): An American-born fiction writer who took British citizenship shortly before his death, James is considered by many to be the master of the novella and novel alike.
- Benito Mussolini** (1883–1945): Leader of the Italian Fascist party and primary European ally of Adolf Hitler's Germany during World War II.
- George Bernard Shaw** (1856–1950): An Irish playwright and literary critic working in England, he is the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize in Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938).
- Franklin D. Roosevelt** (1882–1945): U.S. president for much of World War II, Roosevelt was the only U.S. president voted into office for four terms, serving from 1933 until his death in 1945.
- Vladimir Ilyich Lenin** (1870–1924): Russian revolutionary and theorist of revolution and communism, Lenin was a leader in the October Revolution and the first de facto head of state of the Soviet Union.

adherence to unattainable ideals that would become characteristic of his works.

**Rejection of Realism** *Cyrano de Bergerac* is considered Rostand's dramatic masterpiece, successfully combining humor, romance, and heroic action in expert verse. Based on the life of the seventeenth-century soldier and author Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, the play recounts the hero's faithfulness to his ideals despite his recognition that he will never be rewarded for them. For example, he upholds his artistic principles by refusing to bowdlerize, or modify, his plays to have them performed or to cater to a patron to live comfortably. Adhering to his principles of friendship, he refuses to compete with his friend Christian for the attention of Roxane, the woman they both love, and refrains from destroying Roxane's false image of Christian when he dies, even though it means foregoing his own chance to achieve happiness with her. In its idealism and high romantic approach, *Cyrano de Bergerac* marked a departure from the realist style then *en vogue* in French theater. Sadly, perhaps, the play did not spark a larger trend, and Rostand's own follow-up efforts never quite measured up to the promise that play contained.

### Works in Critical Context

Significant for his revival of romantic verse drama at a time when naturalism and symbolism dominated the French stage,

Rostand combined an excellent sense of theatrical effect with a keen wit. In *The Romancers*, Rostand delivers romantic verse on stage, while his optimistic idealism is best expressed in the comedy *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

**The Romancers** Rostand's first taste of popular success came with the 1894 production of *The Romancers*. Novelist Henry James commented that in *The Romancers*, the "action takes place in that happy land of nowhere—the land of poetry, comedy, drollery, delicacy, profuse literary association... and if the whole thing is the frankest of fantasies... it is the work of a man already conscious of all the values involved." Though he complained that *The Romancers* is also "really too much made up of ribbons and flowers," James concluded that "we note as its especial charm the ease with which the author's fancy moves in his rococo world." Similarly, in the *Fortnightly Review*, G. Jean-Aubry saw *The Romancers* as a balanced example of both Rostand's writing talents and his deficiencies. There is in the play, he claimed, "the germ of all that is best and least good in Rostand; a very great technical cleverness, a facility for making his personages live and move, a tendency to complicate the simplest situations by play of words, and a real charm... in making his rhymes 'sing.'... Already he writes verses that are supple, natural, unforced, and others that are tortured and wrung out with difficulty."

While most critics have concluded that *The Romancers*, as a comedic satire on love, is lighter than Rostand's later plays, Alba della Fazia Amoia asserted that it "contain[s] a moral also: we must have faith in what we are doing and we must remain faithful to love." Rostand received the Toirac prize from the Academie Française for the play at the time. And, indeed, *The Romancers* continues to be performed in its 1960 adaptation as a popular Off-Broadway musical, "The Fantasticks."

**Cyrano de Bergerac** By the end of 1897, the curtain had risen on the drama that most critics agree eclipses the rest of Rostand's oeuvre: *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Though *Cyrano de Bergerac* was to be Rostand's greatest success and was to win him lasting fame, before its debut the theater community had serious doubts about its value. Rostand had to pay for the play's costumes himself, and a few minutes before the curtain rose on *Cyrano* for the first time, he was begging forgiveness of its star, Constant Coquelin, for having involved him in such a fiasco. But when the curtain had fallen, Amoia reports, there was "overwhelming applause... for the poet who finally had dissipated the atmosphere of sadness and futility with which young Frenchmen had lived for so long.... *Cyrano* marked a complete reaction against the Realism of the problem plays then in vogue. It was a new and fresh Romantic poem, with a folk hero... whose identity was shared by all."

Not all critics agreed, however, on the importance or even on the theme of *Cyrano*. Virginia M. Crawford felt that while nothing "could be more noble and

beautiful . . . than Cyrano's love for his cousin Roxane . . . the whole motif of the play is . . . radically false, and consequently lacking in any permanent interest." A contemporary *Poet Lore* reviewer did not take the play's idealism seriously and saw it as a "satirical extravaganza," saying that it would be "naive . . . to take such double-edged fooling as all this for unvarnished tenderness and fresh-born romance." The critic also claimed that to do so would leave the work "bare of any literary distinction worth mentioning. If it is to be considered as a serious dramatic or poetic work, it must be perceived that its structure is of the slightest and most casual."

This point was challenged by Hugh Allison Smith in his 1925 *Main Currents of Modern French Drama*. There, he argues that *Cyrano* should not "be judged . . . by realistic criterions. It is more proper to ask if it is artistic, beautiful, noble or poetic than it is to determine if it is practical, probable, typical or informative." Similarly, an *Edinburgh Review* critic found the play large enough to successfully explore many themes, declaring that to "say of *Cyrano* that it is too elaborate is like objecting to some vigorous forest tree that its leafage is confusing. And the comparison holds good on this point—that *Cyrano de Bergerac* is as structural and organic as a noble tree." This reviewer concluded, "In France, it is necessary to go back to Moliere and to [Pierre Augustin Caron de] Beaumarchais to find anything of equal dramatic fullness of conception, of equal reach and lightness of touch."

## Responses to Literature

1. Define honor from the point of view of Cyrano de Bergerac. Is this sort of honor valuable in the world today? Explain your definition with detailed reference to the play.
2. Research and explain the system of patronage that Rostand despised and discredited. In considering one of his plays, would you say he was effective in discrediting this system? Why or why not?
3. Consider the figure of Cyrano de Bergerac as a representative of the flawed romantic ideal. Physically "imperfect," he is spiritually or morally almost without defect. Write an essay in which you compare Cyrano with two to three other figures from world literature who suffer conflicts between physical appearance and inner reality. What do the authors seem to be suggesting about the relationship between external appearances and inner realities?
4. Rostand is particularly admired for his humor, for the joyous laughter that seems to stand ready in the wings throughout his work, waiting to burst out. Using your library and the Internet, research at least one major theory of humor—what it is, how it works—and determine the extent to which that theory seems to be valid. Support your thesis using one of Rostand's plays as a model.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The protagonist of *Cyrano de Bergerac* is a man of the most consummate principle, though also a ridiculous man in certain ways. It is a credit to Rostand's artistry that he is able to portray the absurdity of idealism in such a way that the audience roots for him anyway. Here are a few other works with absurd but admirable protagonists:

*Don Quixote* (1605–1615), a novel by Miguel de Cervantes. This tale of a would-be knight errant, a dreamer with his head in the clouds dashing off to fight windmills, has been hailed by many as the first novel.

*Candide, or Optimism* (1759), a novel by Voltaire. This Enlightenment-era satire presents the haplessly and helplessly optimistic Candide.

*The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), a novel by Saul Bellow. This novel's eponymous protagonist is buffeted by seemingly random winds of chance as he strives mightily to prove to himself the validity of his own belief in the power and possibility of the individual.

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## ■ Jacques Roumain

BORN: 1907, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

DIED: 1944, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

NATIONALITY: Haitian

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, poetry

MAJOR WORKS:

*Masters of the Dew* (1944)

*Ebony Wood* (1945)

### Overview

Jacques (Jean Baptiste) Roumain was a leader of a group of young Haitian intellectuals who, during the late 1920s and the 1930s, sought Haitian autonomy and an end to the American military occupation of Haiti. His writings support his belief in “art for people’s sake” and in negritude—a defense of black culture and an exploration of the “black perspective” of the world. He is best known for the militant, racially conscious poetry of *Ebony Wood* and the coalescence of Marxist theory and artistic expression in the novel *Masters of the Dew*.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**An Introspective and Melancholy Youth** Roumain was the oldest of eleven children of a landowner, and the



Jacques Roumain *Roumain, Jacques, photograph.*

grandson of former Haitian president Tancrede Auguste. A member of the upper-middle class, he attended school in Port-au-Prince and in 1921 was sent to Grunau, Switzerland, to complete secondary school. There he read works by Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Charles Darwin, and Heinrich Heine and studied the art and philosophy of the Near East. An introspective and sometimes melancholy student, he wrote poetry but also participated in athletic activities, observing that sports satisfied something of the “excess of life which I have.” From Grunau he went to Zurich and prepared for advanced studies in engineering, but somewhat abruptly he decided to study agronomy in Spain to prepare himself to develop his grandfather’s land in Haiti. By 1927, mounting Haitian opposition to American occupation lured Roumain home to join activists fighting for Haitian nationalism.

**Politics, Literature, and Prison** In 1927 Roumain helped found the Haitian reviews *La trouée* and *La revue indigène* with the goal of educating Haitian youth about politics and culture. *La trouée* proposed to confront national issues, but Roumain found its literary standards weak and its expression of political ideas to run counter to its stated orientation, so he resigned by the journal’s second issue. *La revue indigène* was more successful: It published poetry and fiction by Roumain and other Haitians as well as French and Latin American literature in translation. Roumain also contributed to the leftist newspaper *Le petit impartial*, published by George Petit, who, with Roumain, helped unite divergent social levels of Haitian youth. After an article highly critical of the French clergy appeared in *Le petit impartial*, Roumain and Petit were arrested and held for seven months.

**Release from Prison and Escape to Belgium** A series of strikes and civil disorders in Haiti during 1929 and 1930 led the U.S. government to appoint a commission to arrange a peaceful transition to a new government. Recognized as a nationalist leader, Roumain was among a group of opposition representatives who met with the commission and chose Eugène Roy as the new provisional president of Haiti in 1930. Roy appointed Roumain head of the Department of the Interior, a position he resigned within a few months to campaign for Stenio Vincent, who won the first presidential election in late 1930 and reappointed Roumain to his former post.

During this period Roumain published frequently, and these works evidence Roumain’s strong sense of the division between the mixed-race Haitian middle class into which he was born and the black masses with whom he sympathized and identified. His disenchantment with the nationalist government, which had effected no appreciable change in the economic and social conditions of the peasants, reinforced his growing attraction to Marxism. He met with American Communist Party officials in the United States; this, along with his refusal to accept another government post, brought Roumain

under government suspicion, leading to surveillance of his movements and inspection of his mail and packages.

Late in 1932 a letter by Roumain detailing a proposed strike by Haitian laborers against the American Sugar Company was confiscated by government officials. Roumain's subsequent imprisonment was given wide press coverage, inspiring strongly negative sentiment toward him and others who promoted communist ideology. Upon his release, Roumain declared his allegiance to communism and founded the Haitian Communist Party. In 1934 he was arrested on grounds that he had participated in an antigovernment communist conspiracy; a military tribunal sentenced him to three years in prison. Communism was outlawed in Haiti in 1936, and after his release from prison Roumain fled with his wife and son to Belgium.

**Asylum Abroad** In Belgium Roumain studied pre-Columbian art and history; after moving to Paris in 1937, he studied ethnology and related subjects. While in Paris he associated with such antifascist journalists and intellectuals as André Gide, Romain Rolland, and Louis Aragon and wrote articles and fiction for European journals. In 1939 Roumain left Paris for the United States. He began graduate courses in anthropology at Columbia University but soon left for Cuba at the invitation of the communist poet and journalist Nicolas Guillen. After working for a short time as a journalist in Cuba, he returned home to Haiti, which was now under a new government that had offered amnesty to political exiles. In 1943, the new president made Roumain chargé d'affaires to Mexico, a job that gave him the financial support and opportunity to complete his two major works, the poetry collection *Ebony Wood* and the novel *Masters of the Dew*.

Roumain died at the age of thirty-seven in 1944 of an apparent heart attack.

## Works in Literary Context

**Negritude** Negritude was an artistic and political movement established in the 1930s that attempted to identify a unified black identity and culture in opposition to French colonial control. Roumain was a major participant in the movement. Other key figures included Senegal's Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire of Martinique.

In his revolutionary and militant poetry, Roumain became almost obsessed with linking nationalism and negritude to Creole patois and rhythms and images based on African music and dance. Roumain sought to evoke Haitian idioms in his later poetry as well, looking to other black poets, such as America's Langston Hughes, for ways to transform indigenous musical forms and folk material into verse.

## Works in Critical Context

Roumain is primarily remembered and praised for introducing to literature a particularly Haitian voice and for

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Roumain's famous contemporaries include:

**Salvatore Quasimodo** (1901–1968): Italian poet who, in 1959, won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Alan Paton** (1903–1988): South African author and political activist whose best-known work is *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

**Anne Frank** (1929–1945): German-born Jewish girl who died during the Holocaust in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but whose posthumously published diary became one of the best-known personal accounts of World War II.

**Richard Nixon** (1913–1994): Thirty-seventh president of the United States of America who resigned from office in 1974 to avoid impeachment.

**Alejo Carpentier** (1904–1980): Cuban novelist and one of the first practitioners of the "magical realist" style of Latin American literature.

invoking the rhythms of Haitian culture and language effectively. However, given Roumain's intense political views and his frequent brushes with the law because of those views, it is no wonder that his work is imbued with politics and, indeed, has been criticized for being a mere vehicle for Roumain's ideals. Answering critics who consider Roumain's works nothing more than ideological tracts, J. Michael Dash stated:

[Roumain's] concern with the individual will and the quest for spiritual fulfillment show the extent to which he was very much a Romantic individualist rather than an ideologue whose main interest was conformity to Marxist ideals. It was really his strong moral conscience that drove him to the secular creed of Marxism.... Ultimately Roumain emerges as a modern artist concerned with the fate of the creative imagination in a world of broken continuities.

**Masters of the Dew** Dash remarked that during the last four years of Roumain's life the writer abandoned "the early iconoclasm" and pronouncements for "idealistic revolt," becoming "more capable of compromise." *Masters of the Dew*—considered by many the best work of fiction to come out of Haiti—was written during that time; unlike earlier Roumain protagonists incapable of action, its hero, Manuel, rallies feuding villagers to work together and irrigate their drought-stricken land. Although eventually killed by a jealous rival, the leader refuses to name the murderer as he dies, safeguarding the peasants' fledgling unity. Touching on a number of themes important to Roumain—nationalism, communism, romantic love, effective leadership, agricultural

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Roumain used Haitian music to help inform his work and explain black Haitian culture. Other works that combine music and literature to evoke a culture include:

*The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), a collection of fiction and nonfiction by W. E. B. DuBois. This groundbreaking sociological work by civil rights leader DuBois features bars of African American hymns and other music throughout, and an unprecedented, in-depth discussion of spirituals.

*Jazz* (1992), a novel by Toni Morrison. Morrison translates several jazz conventions, including the improvised solo, into literary form in this novel set in 1920s Harlem.

*Coming through Slaughter* (1976), a novel by Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje's novel covers the last years of the life of jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden. Ondaatje uses a style and organization reminiscent of early New Orleans jazz.

reform, and true friendship—*Masters of the Dew* is admired for its masterful synthesis of indigenous Haitian language, music, and folklore. “The novel is a beautiful, exact and tender rendering of Haitian life, of the African heritage, of the simple, impulsive, gravely formal folk, of the poetry and homely bite of their speech, of Congo dances, tropical luxuriance, the love of a land and its people,” stated B. D. Wolfe in a critique for the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Review*.

While manifestly a communist novel (“You have the struggle against the bourgeoisie, the summons of the exploited to class solidarity, the martyr who dies for the cause,” enumerated Edmund Wilson), *Masters of the Dew* transcends its political parameters. Writing in *L'Esprit créateur*, Beverly Ormerod remarked that “strong elements of myth and ritual...underpin the novel....Earth and *coumbite*, dew and water, dust and drought are the recurrent symbols through which the hero's adventure is invested with a legendary quality.” Allusions to Manuel as a Christ-figure are frequent, as are references to pagan vegetation gods Tammuz, Attis, and Adonis. Roumain scholar Jacques-Stephen Alexis called such writing “symbolic realism.” “In theme and outline *Masters of the Dew* is a fairly conventional proletarian novel; in style, imagination, observed detail it is a work of unusual freshness and beauty,” judged R. G. Davis in the *New York Times*. Calling the work “charming, vivid, and original,” a *New Yorker* critic concurred that it is “a routine, almost commonplace story...but one that is so freshly told and has so highly colored a background that it achieves the glowing effect of a tropical blossom.”

## Responses to Literature

1. Some have criticized Roumain, saying that his writings are merely vessels for his ideals and have no merit as works of art. Read *Ebony Wood*. Do you agree or disagree with the criticism Roumain has received? Are Roumain's beliefs clear after reading the work? Cite examples from the text to support your response.
2. In what ways does Roumain utilize African music and dance in his text *Ebony Wood*? How does this use of African music and dance affect your reaction to the collection? In your response, make sure to mention specific passages to help explain your thinking.
3. *Masters of the Dew* attempts to capture Haitian culture and language. The way people speak—the rhythms of their language and the actual vocabulary they use—say a lot about them, and it is difficult to represent dialects effectively in writing. To understand how dialect works, in a short essay, compare how you would describe a date with your boyfriend or girlfriend to a friend through a text message and how you would say the same thing to your mother or grandmother. In your essay, compare the different meanings conveyed in the different ways you say the “same” thing.
4. In *Masters of the Dew*, Manuel is sometimes described as being a Christlike figure. In what ways does Roumain complicate this understanding of Manuel? In what ways does the text support this interpretation? Reference specific examples to support your response.

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## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

BORN: June 28, 1712, Geneva, Switzerland

DIED: July 2, 1778, Ermenonville, France

NATIONALITY: Swiss, French

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction, philosophy

MAJOR WORKS:

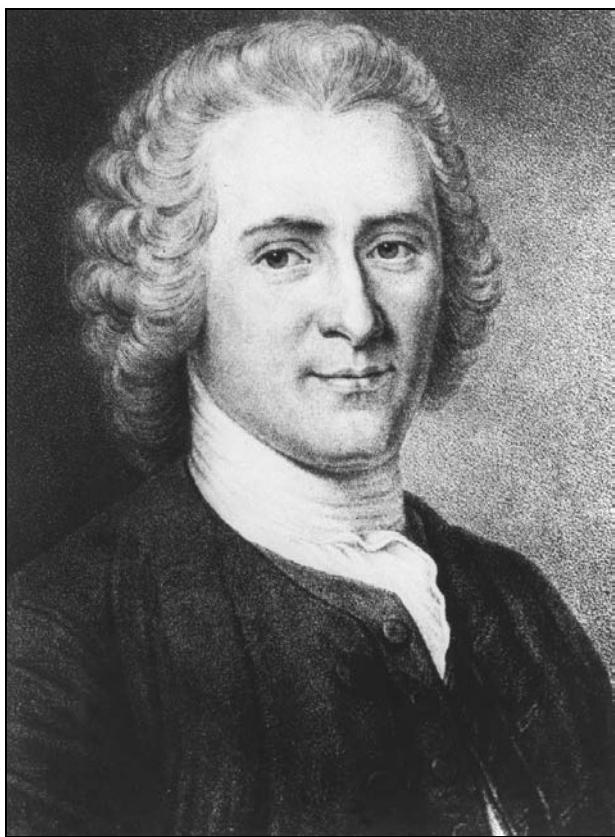
*Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750)

*Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men* (1755)

*Julie; or, The New Héloïse* (1761)

*Émile; or, A Treatise on Education* (1762)

*Confessions* (1781–1788)



Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, photograph. AP Images*

## Overview

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is widely viewed as the greatest social and political philosopher of the French Enlightenment. That his work spans an incredibly wide range of subjects—ethics, religion, sociology, language, fiction, political theory, music, drama, biology, botany, and anthropology—is only part of the problem of trying to summarize his life and contributions. Rousseau has been labeled the “father” of the French Revolution, romanticism, socialism, anarchism, totalitarianism, and even movements for environmental protection. Though his work addressed various issues, Rousseau’s main concern was the question of where “civilization” was leading mankind. His view was that civilization had taken a wrong turn and lost the essence of what really mattered in life. It was still possible to set it right, Rousseau argued, through dedication to the rule of law, individual liberty, and bold innovations in education. In the words of R. A. Leigh, Rousseau “is not only the most original, the most profound and the most controversial of all the great eighteenth-century writers: he is also the most topical.... He will always remain both the prophet and the critic of modern times.”

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

### *Poorly Educated, Locked Out, and On the Road*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in the Calvinist stronghold of Geneva, Switzerland, in 1712, the second son of a watchmaker and his wife (who died ten days after Rousseau’s birth). Later he was brought up by a puritanical aunt who (he admitted in the *Confessions*) did much to warp his sexuality. In 1722, the poorly educated Rousseau had to be apprenticed, first to a notary, then to an engraver.

In March 1728 Rousseau missed the Genevan city curfew, found himself locked outside the gates, and wandered on foot to Annecy in Savoy, where he was taken in by Françoise-Louise de Warens, who became his protector and then (from 1733 to 1740) his lover. Rousseau began to acquire the education he had lacked in Geneva, and the free-minded and controversial works of Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Nicholas de Malebranche, Isaac Newton, and John Locke made a particular impression.

*Catholicism, Enlightenment, Music, and Writing* Mme de Warens, who specialized in finding Catholic converts, sent the young Rousseau to Turin, Italy, where he renounced Calvinism; he even briefly attended a seminary for priests until a Catholic ecclesiastic attempted to seduce him. Rousseau returned to de Warens and completed his education. In 1740 he moved to Lyon, France, to serve as a tutor for the children of M. de Mably. There he met de Mably’s two elder brothers, Étienne Bonnot and the Abbé de Mably. This was the beginning of Rousseau’s connection to the Paris philosophes, a group of thinkers and writers who were spreading

enthusiasm for the new Enlightenment thought that suspected traditional authorities, favored education for all people, and valued reason over superstition or blind allegiance to religious faith.

At this same time Rousseau became a considerable composer and theorist of music; in later years he would represent himself as a simple Swiss musician. In 1742 Rousseau moved to Paris, carrying with him a new system of musical notation, a comedy, an opera, and a collection of poems. Rousseau made a precarious living by tutoring, writing, and copying music; for a brief period (1743–1744) he served, not very happily, as secretary to the French ambassador in Venice. He also met and befriended Denis Diderot, soon-to-be editor of the philosophes' monumental undertaking, the first great French *Encyclopedia*. Diderot commissioned Rousseau's first great writing on the motives for civic participation, *Discourse on Political Economy* (1755).

**Gaining International Renown as a Philosopher**  
It was while visiting Diderot in prison (held for alleged impiety) in 1749 that Rousseau decided to write an essay for a prize competition sponsored by the Academy of Dijon, dealing with the question of whether morals had been harmed or advanced by the rebirth of the arts and sciences. Rousseau won the prize with *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, in which he defended Spartan-Roman civics against the Athenian literary "tyranny" of poets and orators. This made his European reputation, even attracting the attention of the king of Poland.

In 1752 his opera, *The Village Soothsayer*, was performed at the court of Louis XV at Versailles; at roughly the same time his black comedy *Narcissus, the Lover of Himself* was given in Paris at the Théâtre Français. Still calling himself a citizen of Geneva, Rousseau refused a royal pension, and he offended some establishment figures by publishing his *Letter on French Music* (1753) where he defended Italian simplicity against French elaboration.

**Against Inequality, and a Return to His Roots**  
Rousseau published the most radical of his works, *A Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, in May 1754. It argues that the existing aristocratic government is a kind of trick on the part of the rich, who persuade the poor that it is universally and equally advantageous to be subjected to their laws and priorities. In June 1754 Rousseau left Paris for a visit to his native Geneva, where he reconverted to Calvinism, had his civic rights restored, and where he published his *Inequality and the Political Economy* (1755). In 1756 he moved to the countryside, taking up residence at l'Hermitage, the country estate of Mme d'Epina, a move that marked the start of the weakening of Rousseau's ties to the philosophes.

In 1758, Rousseau began *The State of War*, his scathing critique of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, accusing Hobbes of making broad generalizations about "natural" men by observing only badly socialized, ill-educated Englishmen. In the late 1750s Rousseau also

labored on (but never published) the *Moral Letters* and then produced his vast epistolary novel, *Julie; or, The New Héloïse* (1761), with its celebrated account of a small ideal society. The novel was a runaway best seller.

**Rousseau the Educator Arouses (F)Ire** In May 1762 Rousseau brought out two of his greatest but most ill-fated works: *The Social Contract* and *Emile; or, A Treatise on Education*, both focusing on transformative, "denaturing" education. Both were condemned and publicly burned in Paris at the behest of Archbishop Christophe de Beaumont (and with the approval of the Parlement of Paris); Rousseau, under order of arrest, fled to Geneva (only to find the same works condemned and burned there). Against charges of impiety leveled by the Genevan public prosecutor—alleging the danger of Rousseau's "natural" theology—Rousseau composed and published his *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in which he defended ancient "civic" religion and insisted that Christianity produces good men whose otherworldliness makes them "bad citizens." This of course only increased the furor against him, and he took refuge in the Prussian enclave of Neuchâtel.

Renouncing his Genevan citizenship definitively, Rousseau occupied himself by writing a constitution for recently liberated Corsica; increasingly threatened, his paranoia fueled by genuine danger, Rousseau accepted the offer of British refuge given by the philosopher David Hume, although he soon came to see even him as part of the "league of malignant enemies" bent on his destruction. After an unhappy period in England, Rousseau returned incognito to France, living under the assumed name of Renou. While living under this name, Rousseau finally married his longtime companion, Thérèse Levasseur, by whom he had fathered—if the *Confessions* are to be believed—five children, all supposedly abandoned by Rousseau to an orphanage.

**Spending His Last Years in Introspection** The *Confessions*, Rousseau's scandalously honest and sexually graphic autobiography, occupied much of Rousseau's time. In 1772 he produced *The Government of Poland* as part of an effort to avert partition of that country by Prussia, Austria, and Russia; the book combines intelligent constitutional reforms with Rousseau's most glowing account of Spartan and Roman republican civic virtue. In the same year he wrote (without publishing) the innovative and narratively complex *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques (Dialogues)*, in which he had one half of himself comment on the other half. The *Dialogues* portray Rousseau's broodings and show a distinct touch of madness. He decided to give the manuscript to God by placing it on the high altar of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, where, perhaps, the king might also notice it. He carefully prepared to carry out this task, but when he arrived at the church, a railing with locked gates that he had never seen before surrounded the chancel.

Stunned, Rousseau wandered aimlessly all day, now certain that God, too, had joined men against him.

In 1777 Rousseau wrote his last great confessional work, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, which begins with the celebrated words, "Here I am, then, alone on the Earth, no longer having any brother, or neighbor, or friend, or society except myself." A year later, while in refuge on an aristocratic estate at Ermenonville (north of Paris) and while engaging in his beloved botanical studies, Rousseau died quite suddenly on July 2, 1778—two years after the beginning of the American Revolution that was in part a response to his writings, and a little more than a decade before the French Revolution founded more directly on his writings. He was originally buried in a quasi-Roman tomb on the Isle of Poplars, but at the height of the French Revolution in 1794 his ashes were relocated, in a dramatic torchlight procession, to the Panthéon in Paris and placed next to the remains of his one-time rival Voltaire.

## Works in Literary Context

**Enlightenment Ideals** Rousseau was profoundly shaped by, and in turn profoundly shaped, an intellectual and cultural movement that began in France and went on to sweep the rest of Europe and the American colonies throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century. Known even then as the Enlightenment, it was in many ways a reaction against an era of civil warfare, religious fanaticism and intolerance, aristocratic decadence, and increasing social inequality that marked the end of the seventeenth century in England and elsewhere. The proponents of Enlightenment thought were not all philosophers, but they called themselves the philosophes, and their leader in France was Denis Diderot. Diderot became an early patron of Rousseau upon the latter's arrival in Paris, encouraging him to publish his writing and contribute to the massive French *Encyclopedia* that became a platform for the philosophes' ideas.

An encyclopedia can be seen as a perfect Enlightenment project. Enlightenment thinkers wished to see the world through the eyes of reason, science, and empirical observation. An encyclopedia organizes all of human knowledge into categories and family trees, then presents in the equalizing and non-prioritized order of alphabetization. It values no reader over another—it is written for general readers, and no one is prevented from accessing any kind of learning (including taboo subjects such as human anatomy or heretical religious thought). The Enlightenment assumption, seen throughout Rousseau's political works, was that a well-informed public motivated by "enlightened self-interest" could be trusted to run their own government and make the best decisions for the common good.

**Republican Politics** Part of Rousseau's contribution to Enlightenment ideas was his dedication to republican

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rousseau's famous contemporaries include:

**Edward Young** (1683–1765): An English poet and playwright. Young wrote poetry in defense of Christian orthodoxy and against "free-thinkers" such as Rousseau. As a country clergyman, Young also wrote satires, dramatic tragedies, and essays promoting originality in writing.

**Lady Mary Wortley Montagu** (1689–1762): Montagu was an early patron of her relative, novelist Henry Fielding, and a friend and correspondent of poet Alexander Pope and others. Her lively and sharply intelligent letters and poetry appear in several collections. Her most lasting legacy, however, is her introduction of the smallpox vaccine to England after a trip to Constantinople.

**Claude Adrien Helvétius** (1715–1771): A French philosopher who argued that humans are born with a mental *tabula rasa*, a "blank slate" and that, therefore, proper education is crucial. The Catholic Church and the French parliament alike burned his works for the heretical idea that the public interest, not religion, provides the strongest framework for morality.

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685–1750): A German composer, one of the pillars of Western classical music—on par with Mozart and Beethoven. Bach dominates the baroque movement, a style of music with elaborate counterpoint, multiple musical lines, and highly complex organization. Bach was able to combine all of these with intense spirituality.

**Flora Macdonald** (1722–1790): Macdonald lived in America with her husband, Allan Macdonald, a general in the British army during the American Revolution. She was nevertheless instrumental in the failed Scottish effort to restore the Catholic line of Scottish rulers to the British throne, helping Prince Charles Edward Stuart ("the Young Pretender") escape after his defeat in the Battle of Culloden (1746).

politics. "Republican" in this sense means a government run not by a king or tyrant with a supporting network of hereditary aristocracy (as had been the case in Europe for centuries, since the ancient Greeks), but rather by representatives chosen on the basis of the rule of law, personal liberty, and civic virtue. As the American revolutionary John Adams put it, a republic is to be "a government of laws, and not of men." Republican values are found throughout Rousseau's many works, including the overtly political *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, *Discourse on Political Economy*, and *The Social Contract*. In each of these works, Rousseau argues

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rousseau famously argued that “civilization” as it existed in his time had an adverse effect on humankind. Following are some other works that consider the effects of civilization:

*The Tempest* (c. 1610), a play by William Shakespeare. In this play, the sorcerer Prospero and his daughter Miranda have been stranded on an island for years. A monstrous character named Caliban, a resident of the island, complains of the unwelcome effects of the civilization Prospero brings.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a novel by Mark Twain. The young adventurer Huckleberry Finn vigorously resists all attempts by well-meaning adults to “civilize” him and pursues his dreams of “lighting out” to the untamed territories of the American West.

*The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), a film directed by Jamie Uys. A Coca-Cola bottle falls from an airplane and is found by the San people of the Kalahari Desert, who have no familiarity with the world beyond their homeland. They decide that one of the young members of the tribe must take the artifact, presumed to belong to the Gods, to the end of the world to destroy it.

that every man’s highest calling is civic virtue: active participation in the community for the benefit of the common good, based upon individual liberty and the impartial rule of law.

In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men*, for example, Rousseau claims that the rich ruling class has duped the public into thinking that the nobility’s self-interested form of government is best for everyone. So long as there is private property, says Rousseau, there will be inequality masking itself as “civilized” society. “Don’t listen to that imposture; you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and the earth to no one,” he wrote. Man’s greatest ills, said Rousseau, are not natural but made by man himself; the remedy lies also within man’s power. Words like these helped form the basis for the Declaration of the Rights of Man (liberty, equality, fraternity), which was the rallying cry for the French Revolution (1789–1799).

**The “Noble Savage”** Many philosophers of Rousseau’s day considered intellectual questions about the family and the individuals in it: What was a family like before the advent of “civilization”? How were children raised? Deeply critical of his society, Rousseau believed that social and political inequalities corrupted people. As a result, he endorsed a view of mankind that found pockets of popularity throughout the eighteenth century, the idea that primitive man is superior to modern man since

he is free of this corruption. Primitive man’s instincts were more accurate, his religion more sincere, his emotions more intense and pure, and his societies more reasonable. As reports came back from voyagers about Native Americans, South Sea Islanders, and Africans, these Europeans often had their opinions validated. Authors such as Voltaire, François Châteaubriand, and James Fenimore Cooper all used Noble Savage characters, but Rousseau was the writer who most systematically wove the ideals through many of his works in multiple genres.

**Traditional Gender Roles and Libertine Sexuality** Rousseau’s novel *Emile* is an excellent example of how Enlightenment philosophers, who were liberal in many regards about questions of human rights and individual liberty, were often conservative in their views about relationships between men and women. While Enlightenment thinkers criticized many other aspects of European culture and society, they tended to consider the traditional gender relations of their time as natural and preferable. In *Emile*, Sophie, Emile’s future partner, is smart, but not too intelligent for Emile, and her skills lie in the domestic duties for which Rousseau believed women were naturally suited: sewing, cooking, and housekeeping. Rousseau wrote that a woman’s natural sphere of influence was the home, while a man’s was the government.

For all his traditionalism in the realm of gender roles, Rousseau was a champion of sexual liberation and experimentation. In an era when the Marquis de Sade was also considered an Enlightenment thinker, sexual freedom was sometimes seen as an expression of radical individual liberties. In his *Confessions*, Rousseau admitted to, and defended, such publicly shocking but privately common “peculiarities” as exhibitionism, masochism, masturbation, and numerous casual affairs. The *Confessions* were originally written as an elaborate self-defense against what Rousseau perceived to be his many persecuting enemies, but they set off a fashion for shockingly confessional autobiography throughout the Romantic era in the early nineteenth century, including Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1822).

### Works in Critical Context

The closest thing to a consensus to be achieved by more than two hundred years of scholarship on Rousseau is that his work must be analyzed as a whole in order to even begin to understand him and that, even then, synthesis is almost impossible. His influence is vast and uneven. Although Rousseau always insisted on the fundamental unity of his thought, he was frequently ambiguous and deliberately cultivated paradox in his writing.

Rousseau’s work was predictably controversial at its first appearance; it found the extremes of critical opinion and not much in between. In 1790 Edmund Burke wrote that Rousseau gave rise to “new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals” and declared that “the writings of

Rousseau lead directly to shameful evil." Sir James Mackintosh, on the other extreme, saw Rousseau as one "who unshackled and emancipated the human mind." In France, particularly during and immediately after the French Revolution, Rousseau was extremely popular: "Him they study, him they meditate; him they turn over in all the time they can spare," wrote Burke. And he goes on: "Rousseau is their canon of holy writ; in his life he is their canon of *Polyclitus*, he is their standard figure of perfection." Rousseau was widely read in England well into the 1800s, but once Napoléon's power was established, British enthusiasm for all things French diminished dramatically. According to Edmund Gosse, Rousseau's influence "was like a snow man in the sun; it melted and dripped from every limb, from all parts of its structure." Rousseau was usually read in secret if he was read at all throughout much of the nineteenth century. John Morley's appreciative biography *Rousseau* (1873) was a rare exception.

As the bicentenary of Rousseau's birth approached and the Napoleonic wars seemed like a distant memory, with World Wars I and II taking shape (where England and France were close allies), English critics began to catch up with other European scholars in their more balanced views of Rousseau. His paradoxes began to seem more of a challenge than a frustration. J. Middleton Murry wrote that Rousseau's paradoxes are an "unremitting endeavour to express an intuitive certainty in intellectual terms.... He seems to surge upwards on a passionate waver of revolutionary ideas, only to sink back into the calm of conservative or quietist conclusions."

**The Discourse on the Sciences and Arts** Criticism has often been dominated by studies of how Rousseau "founded" certain movements and events, but more recently, more attention has been paid to the actual content of Rousseau's writing and ideas. For instance, Sally Campbell and John Scott note that "Rousseau's arguments often turn on a correct understanding of the relationship between cause and effect. Cause and effect are easily confounded, and he criticizes his predecessors for their errors in reasoning." Campbell and Scott go on to argue, however, that "the principal cause-effect argument of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* is actually the opposite of the one Rousseau initially seems to posit in his work. Whereas he first suggests that the sciences and arts themselves corrupt morals, his ultimate argument is that the corruption of morals is the cause of the advancement of the sciences and arts and of their corrupting effect." Even the most dedicated of Rousseau's scholars, however, find it difficult or impossible to read everything that Rousseau wrote and to synthesize it all into a single coherent interpretation.

## Responses to Literature

- How do you reconcile the traditional morality and gender relationships found in Rousseau's novels, *Julie; or, The New Héloïse* and *Émile*, with the radical

politics of individual liberty found in his political writing? Do you find Rousseau to be paradoxical, hypocritical, or flexible? Are these positive or negative qualities?

- Research the reasons why Rousseau was controversial or offensive to many people in the eighteenth century. Are these the same reasons why Rousseau may be controversial or offensive today? What is mainstream about Enlightenment values today, and what is still problematic?
- We are surrounded by "confessions" today—on television talk shows, in blogs and social networking sites, best-selling memoirs, and even game shows. How is today's confessional culture like and unlike what Rousseau was doing in his *Confessions*? How did Rousseau's pioneering work help establish the model for later confessional literature?
- As a social thinker, Rousseau was convinced of the essential innocence of the human being "in a state of nature." Read several of his writings on this subject and either formulate an attack on his position or defend him from detractors. It may be useful to formulate your thoughts as a sort of debate, in which both sides make specific reference to and offer explanations of Rousseau's various positions on the subject.

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## J. K. Rowling

BORN: 1965, Chipping Sodbury, England

NATIONALITY: British

GENRE: Fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997)

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000)

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003)

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005)

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007)

### Overview

J. K. Rowling is widely acclaimed for her novels depicting the adventures of the beloved character Harry Potter, a brave young wizard. She caused a sensation with her first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), which sold out of its first edition quickly and has been reprinted many times. The first Harry Potter book established a firm reputation for Rowling, both within literary circles and in the minds of the reading public. With seven Harry Potter books appearing in sixty-three languages, Rowling is one of the best-loved and most-read contemporary authors.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood in the Countryside** Joanne Rowling was born on July 31, 1965, in Chipping Sodbury, in Southwest England. She grew up with a younger sister and a distinct inclination toward storytelling. Rabbits played a large part in her early tales, for Rowling and her sister



J. K. Rowling *Rowling, JK, photograph. David Cheskin / EPA / Landov.*

badly wanted a rabbit. Her first story, at age five or six, involved a rabbit dubbed, quite logically, Rabbit, who got the measles and visited his friend, a giant bee named Miss Bee.

Two moves took the Rowling family to the town of Tutshill near Chepstow in the Forest of Dean along the border of England and Wales. This brought a long-time country-living dream to fruition for Rowling's parents, both Londoners, and the nine-year-old Rowling learned to love the countryside in this new abode. She and her sister could wander unsupervised amid the fields and play along the River Wye.

From Tutshill Primary, Rowling went to Wyedean Comprehensive School. Rowling confided to Roxanne Feldman in an interview in *School Library Journal* that the character of Harry's friend Hermione is loosely based on herself at age eleven. English was her favorite subject. She created serial stories for her friends at lunchtime, and writing became more a compulsion and less of a hobby in her teenage years.

Rowling attended college at Exeter University, where she studied French and the classics. Upon graduation, she moved to London and found work as a

researcher and secretary. During this time, she used the computer to type up her own stories during quiet times. At age twenty-six, Rowling gave up her office job to teach English in Portugal. It was there that she began yet another story that might become a book, about a boy who is sent off to wizard school. All during the time she spent in Portugal, Rowling took notes on this story and added bits and pieces to the life of her protagonist, Harry Potter. In Portugal she also met Jorge Arantes, the man who became her first husband and with whom she had a daughter; Arantes and Rowling divorced in 1995.

**Harry Potter Brings Success** In late 1994, Rowling returned to the United Kingdom with her daughter and settled in Edinburgh. Unemployed and poor, the single mother used this time to complete her first novel, working on the manuscript in local coffee shops. Rowling sent her manuscript to several publishers before Bloomsbury published *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997.

Even before its British release, publishers in the United States were vying for rights to the book. Scholastic won the bid, paying one hundred thousand dollars, the most ever for a first novel by a children's book author. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (released as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in the United States) rose to the top of the children's best-seller lists in 1998 and was later made into a popular movie. Its sequel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), went to the top of the adult best-seller lists in England shortly after its release, and consumer demand in the United States for the book ushered in a new era in Internet sales of books internationally, fueling concern over publishing rights. Rowling continued her saga of seven Harry Potter books, spinning a magical blend of wit and fantasy.

**From Rags to Riches** Rowling has won numerous awards and is now employed full-time in her life's ambition as a writer, earning an estimated \$1 billion for her stories about the boy wizard. Rowling remarried in 2001 and now lives in a mansion in Scotland with her husband and three children.

## Works in Literary Context

### Fantasy and a Special Hero

Rowling's work follows a long tradition in literature that uses fantasy worlds to explore morality and human frailty in real life. Perhaps the archetypal novel for the negotiation of morality in the realm of fantasy is Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, while more recent examples would include the fiction of authors ranging from Isaac Asimov and Ursula Le Guin to Kurt Vonnegut. Accordingly, it is through the adventures of a romantic hero, Harry Potter, who is caught in the conflicts between good and evil, that Rowling expresses her views on morality in a sociocultural context.

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rowling's famous contemporaries include:

**Vladimir Putin** (1952–): This Russian politician succeeded Boris Yeltsin and served as second president of the Russian Federation from 2000 until 2008.

**George W. Bush** (1946–): This Republican politician served as the forty-sixth governor of Texas and the forty-third president of the United States.

**Stephen King** (1947–): An immensely popular American author of horror fiction who blends elements of the traditional gothic tale with those of the modern psychological thriller, detective, and science fiction genres.

**Orhan Pamuk** (1952–): This Turkish author was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his writings, which explore tension between the Eastern and Western worlds.

In explaining the nearly universal appeal of Rowling's books, critics cite common archetypal themes. Harry Potter is a young version of the classic romantic hero. He is an orphan who has led a miserable life with the Dursley family, his maternal aunt and uncle. Ever since Harry arrived unannounced at their doorstep, the Dursleys have been put out, as has their vile son, Dudley. Harry has taken up residence in a broom closet under the stairs, been bullied at school, and mistreated by the Dursleys. Small, skinny, and bespectacled, Harry is an unlikely hero. The only thing physically interesting about Harry is the lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.

In each novel Harry faces a quest, although the quest often reveals itself slowly throughout the course of the book. Harry encounters adversaries and helpers along his way—some human and some magical. While he is at times outsmarted, he rarely fails to rebound and is consistently aided by his friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Some critics have asserted that the books are formulaic because of these basic and universal themes, but Rowling's writing style and imaginative plot twists have maintained readers' interest.

## Works in Critical Context

From the first volume, critics have been nearly unanimous in their praise of the Harry Potter books. With each subsequent novel, and concurrent with the aging process for the main characters, Rowling's themes have become darker and her plots more challenging to follow. Intricate plotlines and more mature subject matter parallel the growing complexity of Harry and his relationships with friends as they move through adolescence toward adulthood.

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Harry is a young romantic hero. In each novel he faces a quest, battles evil, and ultimately succeeds. Other works that feature romantic heroes include:

*Candide* (1759), a novel by Voltaire. Considered by many to be part of the Western canon of great literature, this work explores the human condition and contains themes of travel and quest.

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), a novel by L. Frank Baum. In this story, Dorothy, a girl from Kansas, undertakes a journey down the yellow brick road to find her way home after a tornado lands her house in another dimension.

*The Lord of the Rings* (1954 and 1955), a novel trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien. In this high-fantasy epic, the story's protagonist and romantic hero, Frodo Baggins, embarks on a quest to destroy a ring, an artifact of malevolent power.

*The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), a novella by Samuel Johnson. In this novella, an adventurous prince sets off with his sister and an adviser in search of happiness.

**Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone** Most critics have been approving of Rowling's novels. According to *Contemporary Authors*, Amanda Craig from *New Statesman* "loved" the first Harry Potter book and hailed Rowling's tale as full of "zest and brio." Lee Siegel of the *New Republic* found the book appealing because of Rowling's "wholehearted absorption in her universe." Siegel also praised Rowling's characterization, noting, "Harry and his friends Hermione and Ron Weasley are good kids, but they are not innocent, Wordsworthian kids. They usually do the right thing, and they always feel bad when they do the wrong thing." Other critics believe the appeal lies in the rich imaginary world that Rowling creates. As the children of this generation read these books with fascination and love, they will pass the stories on to their children.

### Responses to Literature

1. Compare and contrast the nonmagical human Muggles and the magical members of Hogwarts School in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. What role do the similarities and difference between these two worlds play in furthering the novel's themes?
2. Recall the role of the Sorting Hat in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. What do you learn about Harry during his encounter with it? Support your conclusions with evidence from the text.

3. Discuss the prejudice against the members of the house of Slytherin in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. What problems does this prejudice cause, and why?
4. Many of the characters in the Harry Potter series have names that seem to describe their personalities in some way. Make a list of ten names you think are especially fitting for their characters and, using examples from the texts, explain how you made your choices. Now make up a name for yourself. Explain the process you went through to choose the name and why it fits you.

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## Tadeusz Rozewicz

BORN: 1921, Radomsko, Poland

NATIONALITY: Polish

GENRE: Poetry, drama, fiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Anxiety* (1947)

*Collected Poems* (1957)

*The Card Index* (1960)

*Birth Rate* (1968)

*White Marriage* (1974)

### Overview

Tadeusz Rozewicz is a Polish writer who earned a high reputation at home and abroad for his innovative poetry, drama, and prose works. The horrors he witnessed during World War II and its aftermath suffuse the form and content of his early writing. His later works address more universal themes, always reflecting the alienation and disenchantment of modern life. His work is avant-garde and experimental, blending diverse forms and challenging many artistic conventions.



Tadeusz Rozewicz *Rozewicz, Tadeusz*, photograph by Layle Silbert.  
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## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**A Murdered Brother and Literary Footsteps to Fill** Rozewicz was born October 9, 1921, in Radomsko, Poland, a small provincial town isolated from the country's larger cosmopolitan centers. His father was a minor judicial officer. His older brother, Janusz, a promising poet murdered by the Gestapo in 1944, was an early literary influence. With Janusz, Rozewicz cowrote a play in his teens and coedited a school newspaper. Shortly before Hitler's invasion in 1939, he withdrew from school and was forced to seek work as a physical laborer.

**Fighting the Nazis and a Disillusionment in Humanity** Rozewicz spent the first years of World War II in Radomsko, then under German occupation, at various jobs—messenger, factory worker, and building superintendent. For a year, he served in a peasant battalion of the underground "Home Army." The experience gave him a firsthand view of the cataclysm that nearly leveled Poland and destroyed one fifth of its population. While a partisan, in 1944 he published his first writing under a pseudonym. After the war, Rozewicz was twice decorated for his military service.

Following the conclusion of hostilities, the twenty-four-year-old survivor moved to Kraków. From 1945 to

1949, he studied art history at the Jagiellonian University, and he began publishing satirical prose in various journals. Several of these pieces, along with his poems, appeared in Rozewicz's first postwar collection, *In a Spoonful of Water* (1946). In Kraków, Rozewicz decided to become a professional writer.

The Nazi occupation and the carnage of war had undermined the young author's faith in humanity. Having survived the Holocaust, his generation now found itself living under Stalinist Communism. Consumed with outrage and feeling guilty to have survived, Rozewicz channeled his frustration into a distinctive artistic response. His first significant volume of verse, *Anxiety* (1947), brought instant acclaim. Its stark, antipoetic diction and innovative verse arrangements seemed an appropriate poetic answer to the Auschwitz death camp and its bleak aftermath.

**Rejecting Both Communist and Capitalist Ideologies** Rozewicz's poetry filled eight collections in nine years. These works are devoid of ornament, stripped of form, and expressively blunt. Juxtaposing the feelings of a victim and a perpetrator of violence, Rozewicz described a human race with little faith and with a bleak future. Suspicious of all ideology, he perceived Western culture as a massive, deceptive spectacle. In 1949, Rozewicz left the more urbane Kraków for a crowded flat in Gliwice, a working-class city in southern Poland. He and his wife, Wiesława Kozłowska, another former partisan, stayed for two decades, raising two sons in relative poverty.

The Polish Communist regime politicized all aspects of life, mandating that art reflect socialist ideals and dogma. At a literary convention in 1948, Rozewicz openly ridiculed a Marxist journal that advocated adherence to socialist realism, and he was subsequently shunned by the writers' union. Because he refused to let his writing serve official policy, he was called an "internal émigré." For a short time, Rozewicz relented, penning some sunny poems in conventional verse structures, which he later disowned.

In the mid-1950s, Rozewicz turned to creative prose. Some of his stories were satirical or surrealistic. One poignant prose work, "Excursion to a Museum" (1959), follows a boorish working-class group that takes a day trip to Auschwitz, and returns disappointed by its lack of entertainment value.

**The Shift to Playwriting** In 1957, at the age of thirty-six, Rozewicz became the first Polish writer of his generation to be honored with a collected edition of his poetry. The accolade not only made his work an instant classic but also gave a sense of closure to his verse. In the next two decades, he staged more than a dozen plays, many of them innovative and controversial. He made a splash in 1960 with the Warsaw premiere of his first major dramatic work, *The Card Index*. The play rejects plot, narrative logic, and characterization. The central figure is a nameless man who lounges on his bed

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rozewicz's famous contemporaries include:

- Czesław Miłosz** (1911–2004): The Polish American poet and translator who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980.
- Günter Grass** (1927–): A German novelist and Nobel Prize winner, most famous for his novel *The Tin Drum*.
- Wislawa Szymborska** (1923–): The Polish poet and essayist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.
- Andrzej Wajda** (1926–): A Polish film director and friend of Rozewicz, Wajda is one of the most prominent members of the Polish Film School.
- Pope John Paul II** (1920–2005): The first Polish pontiff (1978–2005) and first non-Italian pope since the sixteenth century.

throughout the play, contemplating his fingers and toes, and ignoring the other characters who question him. This outrageous work closed after nine performances, but has since become a staple in school curricula.

Several plays followed in rapid succession. *The Witnesses* (1962) took aim at the materialistic consumerism Rozewicz perceived in a society whose foundations, despite surface normality, had been seriously undermined. In *The Interrupted Act* (1964), Rozewicz constructed a play that resists performance. He left it incomplete, with disjointed stage directions, the value of which can only be determined by a director and cast.

His efforts to write an antiplay continued with *Birth Rate* (1968). Concerned with overpopulation, it features a subway train that fills up with more and more people. Several explosions follow, then the characters start flirting with each other, and end up cooing like pigeons. The title character of his next play, *The Old Woman Broods* (1970) sits as garbage accumulates around her. Again Rozewicz leaves the play deliberately unfinished so that it can be presented with different results and meanings.

***Independence, before and after the Fall of the “Iron Curtain”*** By the 1970s, Rozewicz was one of Poland's most published and discussed writers. During a slight relaxation in censorship, he aroused controversy with the drama *White Marriage* (1974). The frank sexuality in this comedy of manners proved immensely popular with Polish (and non-Polish) audiences, but the establishment and the church both condemned it as pornographic. Rozewicz explored the life of one of his literary heroes, Franz Kafka, in the loosely biographical play *The Trap* (1982). The play also depicts the demise of artistic creativity, played out against visions of the impending “final solution”—Hitler's largely executed

plan for the systematic murder of all Jews in Europe. *The Trap* is Rozewicz's only drama to deal explicitly with the Holocaust.

Poland began undergoing a dramatic political crisis in the 1980s. The imposition of martial law in 1981 failed to deter the defiant Solidarity labor union, around which resistance to Soviet-supported authoritarian rule had coalesced. In 1989, the nation elected a non-Communist Parliament, as citizens' movements across Eastern Europe swept the Communists from power. Rozewicz, however, fell into an artistic silence, publishing only a few sporadic poems between 1983 and 1991. An ardent defender of his artistic independence, he refused to respond to the political and social ferment transforming Central and Eastern Europe. His brief flirtation with socialist realism in the early 1950s had made him wary of placing his art in the service of ideology—no matter whose ideology it was. While Poland was under martial law, Rozewicz had also declined the prestigious Juliusz Słowacki Prize (in 1982). By 1991, though, Rozewicz's self-imposed artistic withdrawal ended. He published five collections of poetry in the 1990s, and produced a memoir of his brother Janusz, *Our Elder Brother* (1992). In 2008, his volume of *New Poems* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. He continues to live and write in Poland.

### Works in Literary Context

Ever since his youth in the remote provincial town of Radomsko, Tadeusz Rozewicz has been an outsider, estranged from the establishment and impervious to literary trends. His work rejects both classical and avant-garde traditions, making literary influences on his work difficult to trace. While fighting in the Polish underground, Rozewicz intensively read Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and the nineteenth-century Polish bard Juliusz Słowacki. Some of the disturbing images in his work are reminiscent of Franz Kafka; his plays *The Hunger Artist Departs* (1976) and *The Trap* spring from Kafka's life and work. As a young writer in Kraków, Rozewicz met Julian Przybos, a leading avant-garde poet of the interwar period who became Rozewicz's editor, mentor, and an important creative influence. Aside from Przybos, however, Rozewicz shunned Kraków's literary community.

**Society Unmoored** A constant motif in Rozewicz's writing, across all genres and stages of his career, is a ferocious attack on the premises of Western civilization. Without a doubt, the harrowing experience of the Nazi occupation, followed by decades of totalitarian Communist rule, convinced the author that modern society had lost all ethical and spiritual coordinates. This perspective accounts for the absurdism in his drama, the depictions of violence and depravity in his poetry, and recurrent themes of nostalgia for an idealized past, longing for an unrealized utopia, and reverence for the wisdom of the elderly.

**Antipoetry and Impure Form** Rozewicz's disdain for the very foundations of culture is the basis for his approach to artistic expression. He rejects the formal conventions of poetry, such as meter, rhyme, and metaphor, and re-creates the poetic through subversive, contrary strategies. His early verse is minimalist, stripped of all pretense, and skeptical of the legitimacy of poetry itself, or of the ability of language to express reality. His experimental plays similarly subvert theatrical norms, conventions, and expectations. His body of work has fused prose, poetry, and drama into one idiosyncratic artistic whole, a strategy that some critics call "impure form." Alongside Wislawa Szymborska and Zbigniew Herbert, he is one of the most influential contemporary Polish poets and dramatists.

### Works in Critical Context

**Censorship and Celebration** Tadeusz Rozewicz is critically regarded as one of the most talented and influential literary figures of post–World War II Poland. Critics, however, react quite divergently to his style. While some admire the sparseness of his poetry, others contend that it makes the writing uneven. Rozewicz achieved recognition early in his career, but his standing in Poland wavered along with the politics of the times. He thrice won the State Award for poetry, and he was voted the nation's most distinguished living poet in 1971. At other times, however, his work was censored. Both the government and the opposition kept him at a distance, carefully assessing his work for covert political messages. Rozewicz's strict apolitical stance, and the increasingly provocative themes of his writings, fueled his notoriety in the 1960s. Critics attacked him as a nihilist, his former mentor Przybos denounced him, and prominent clergy referred to his work as "smut."

Internationally, his profile has risen steadily over the decades. His verse has been translated into numerous European and Asian languages, and his plays have been performed throughout Europe and North America. He has read his work many times overseas, and received numerous international prizes. In this time, his rejection of traditions both poetical and political has garnered him much admiration. Teresa Halikowska-Smith writes approvingly of "his famous 'anti-poetry' programme in which he re-stated Adorno's contention that poetry after Auschwitz was no longer possible," describing him as one of Poland's three best-known poets.

### Responses to Literature

- Analyze some of the ways Rozewicz addresses the subject of war in his poetry.
- How does Rozewicz's poetic style underscore the message and meaning of his poetry?
- In your opinion, is Rozewicz a nihilist—a person who believes in nothing? What underlying

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The dramas of Tadeusz Rozewicz mercilessly mock reality, society, and the theater itself. Here are some other works in the same deeply critical vein.

- The Breasts of Tiresias* (1947), an opera by Francis Poulenec. This surrealistic opera begins with a woman becoming a man as her breasts turn into floating balloons.
- The Bald Soprano* (1950), a drama by Eugene Ionesco. In this play, two families engage in a nonsensical conversation that seems to demolish language itself.
- Endgame* (1957), a play by Samuel Beckett. A master who cannot stand up and his servant who cannot sit down are the protagonists of this classic play from the Theater of the Absurd.
- The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), a film written and directed by Luis Buñuel. A group repeatedly gathers and fails to dine together in this sly and hilarious attack on middle-class behavior.
- Bus Stop* (1983), a play by Gao Xingjiang. People wait for years as buses go by without stopping in this absurdist play by the Nobel Prize winner.

ethical or philosophical values are present in his writing?

- Citing one or two of Rozewicz's plays, write an essay explaining how and why he aims to subvert theatrical conventions.
- Rozewicz frequently writes about the need to construct new roles for poetry in society. What roles does he have in mind, and how does his work strive to do this?

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## Juan Rulfo

BORN: 1918, Apulco, Mexico

DIED: 1986, Mexico City, Mexico

NATIONALITY: Mexican

GENRE: Fiction, drama

MAJOR WORKS:

*The Burning Plain and Other Stories* (1953)

*Pedro Páramo* (1955)

*The Golden Cock, and Other Film Scripts* (1980)

### Overview

Although Mexican author Juan Rulfo's literary production was meager, it has had an impact on Latin American narrative fiction. His popularity, not only in Latin America but also in Europe, may be explained by the fact that his collection of short stories *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories* (1953) and his novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) capture the essence of rural Mexico and its people in a powerful way.

### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Childhood Marred by Loss** Born Juan Nepomuceno Carlos Pérez Rulfo Vizcaíno on May 16, 1918, in Apulco, Mexico, he was the son of Juan Nepomuceno Pérez, a civil servant, and María Vizcaíno Arias de Pérez. Soon after Rulfo's birth, his family moved to nearby San Gabriel, the city that left an indelible image in his mind and was later integrated into his fiction.

In San Gabriel, Rulfo attended elementary school with his two brothers and experienced the Cristero revolt (1926–1927), a religious war that broke out in central Mexico between armed Catholics and the anti-Catholic Mexican government over anticlerical provisions of the



Juan Rulfo *Rulfo, Juan, photograph. AP Images.*

1917 Constitution of Mexico. His father was assassinated in 1925, which left a profound emotional wound in the young boy, and two years later his mother died of a heart attack. In 1928, Rulfo and his brothers were sent to Guadalajara and were placed in the Luis Silva School for orphans, where Rulfo remained until 1932. Though Rulfo's life was unstable, the Mexican government had become politically stable with the formation of what became known as the Industrial Revolutionary Party.

**Moved to Mexico City** Wishing to continue his education, Rulfo registered at the Universidad de la Guadalajara, but on the same day he entered school, a strike was declared by the students and the university was closed. Because of the strike, he went to Mexico City early in 1934, where he attended the national university to study law. As soon as his financial aid provided by an uncle stopped, Rulfo abandoned the university and began to seek employment. From 1935 to 1945, he worked in the Department of the Interior as an immigration agent.

In Mexico City, Rulfo soon wrote a novel, of which little is known except the title, *Son of Affliction*, and a short fragment, "A Piece of Night," dated January 1940 but not published until 1959. Although this fragment seems to be a chapter of a longer work, it has the

structure of a short story. The fragment reflects the style and narrative technique of later stories by Rulfo, such as the aura of vagueness that hovers over the identification of people and things, as well as the indecisiveness of the characters, who are surrounded by a sense of mystery.

**First Publications** Rulfo had the good fortune to have as an immigration coworker Efrén Hernández, an accomplished short-story writer from whom he learned a great deal about the art of writing. Hernández introduced Rulfo to Marco Antonio Millán, the editor of the literary periodical *América*, where in 1945 Rulfo published his first story, "Life Is Not Very Serious about Things."

The story, at one time rejected by Rulfo as unworthy of his ability, can only be considered inferior when compared with the two others he published the same year, 1945, while visiting Guadalajara. There he joined Juan José Arreola and Antonio Alatorre in the publication of the literary periodical *Pan*, where two of Rulfo's best stories, "Macario" and "They Gave Us the Land," appeared in July and November of that year. In these two stories Rulfo demonstrates a mastery of technique and style not present in his earlier efforts. These two *Pan* stories are his first significant works.

**Balanced Work, Family with Writing** In 1947, Rulfo married Clara Aparicio, with whom he had three sons, Francisco, Pablo, and Juan Carlos, and a daughter, Claudia. Back in Mexico City that same year, he took a job as a publicist, a position he held until 1954. Meanwhile, in 1952 he received a fellowship from the Centro de Escritores Mexicanos, which made it possible for him to dedicate more time to writing. It was around this time that he decided to collect his stories, both published and unpublished.

This first book, which was an immediate success, was published the following year under the title of one of the stories, *El llano en llamas, y otros cuentos* (*The Burning Plain, and Other Stories*) (1953). The Centro fellowship was extended for another year, and it is assumed that during this period he wrote the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955). In 1955, he accepted a position with the government to develop the Papaloapan River basin in southern Mexico. The project was discontinued in 1956, and Rulfo was back in Mexico City. Two years later, he returned to office work, this time in charge of the archives of the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística. He apparently liked this type of work, which was suitable for his rather quiet, withdrawn nature.

**Brief Foray Back to Guadalajara** Dissatisfied, though, with life in metropolitan Mexico City, in 1959 he went back to Guadalajara with his family in search of peace and tranquility. However, in this state capital, things went from bad to worse, his life being complicated by his heavy drinking and ill health. While working at Telecentro, he found time to write a short novel, *The Cockfighter*, which he did not publish, and the script for a

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rulfo's famous contemporaries include:

**Ingmar Bergman** (1918–2007): Swedish film and stage director widely recognized as one of the greatest and most influential filmmakers of modern cinema. His films include *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955).

**Jorge Luis Borges** (1899–1986): Argentine writer responsible for the "Boom," a literary movement of which Rulfo was part. His short-story collections include *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941).

**Leonard Bernstein** (1918–1990): American conductor, composer, author, music lecturer, and pianist best known for his long conducting relationship with the New York Philharmonic. He wrote the music for Broadway musicals such as *West Side Story* (1957).

**Gabriel García Márquez** (1927–): One of the most well known Latin American fiction writers, Márquez has cited Rulfo as a major influence. His novels include *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985).

**Carlos Fuentes** (1928–): Mexican writer with whom Rulfo collaborated on his screenplay for *The Golden Cock*. Fuentes's novels include *Aura* (1962).

short film, *The Plunder*. But in 1962, he went back to Mexico City, this time to stay for the rest of his life.

The public had to wait until 1980 to read another new book of fiction by Rulfo. *The Golden Cock, and Other Film Scripts* is a slender volume of only 143 pages that consists of his two major works of fiction and his film scripts. It is not clear whether these texts were reconstructed from the films, from the original scripts, or if they are the original versions written by Rulfo during the early 1960s.

**Skilled Photographer** In 1980, Rulfo also published *Inframundo*, which includes his photographs that primarily focus on the countryside of his native region, the southern, bare, arid, economically deprived part of the central Mexican state of Jalisco. While Mexico had become politically stable, expanded economically, and seen the rise of the middle class after World War II, there was still general neglect of the poorest segments of the population. Many peasants, like those who lived in Jalisco, were not much better off than they had been in 1910.

Suffering from lung cancer since 1985, Rulfo died of a heart attack in Mexico City on January 7, 1986.

### Works in Literary Context

Rulfo's favorite authors were novelists, especially the leading Russians, Scandinavians, Italians, Americans, and Brazilians. His interest in literature, and above all fiction,

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* is about a town full of dead people. The ghosts in this novel are seeking to tell their tales of death and betrayal. Here are a few other stories that feature ghosts as important characters:

*Hamlet* (1599–1601), a play by William Shakespeare. The ghost of Prince Hamlet's father returns one night to tell Hamlet he was murdered by his brother, King Claudius. *The Changeling* (1980), a film directed by Peter Medak. In an eerie Victorian mansion, a man must unravel the mystery of a child poltergeist and determine what he wants.

*Beloved* (1987), a novel by Toni Morrison. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, a ghost comes back to haunt her mother, an escaped slave.

*The Others* (2001), a film directed by Alejandro Amenábar. This story of a woman and her children who move into an old mansion spirals out of control when supernatural events begin happening inside the house.

had its roots in his early years in San Gabriel. The local priest had left Rulfo's grandmother a small library that Rulfo utilized. The first novels he read were the books of adventure by Emilio Salgari and Alexandre Dumas. He then became interested in English, American, and northern European novelists. Among the contemporary French writers, one of his favorites was Jean Giono; among the Germans, Günter Grass; and among the Italians, Vasco Pratolini.

***The Importance of Place and History in Pedro Páramo***  
Rulfo said that the idea of writing a novel about San Gabriel, the town where he had spent his boyhood, came to him "from an earlier period. It was, it can be said, almost planned about ten years before. I had not written a single line when it was already turning in my mind." The setting, the characters, the tone, and the narrative devices found in his short stories appear in the novel. The great difference is that in the novel all the people are dead. The idea of creating a ghost town where the inhabitants continue living after they have died came to Rulfo after a visit he made to San Gabriel, where, instead of finding the idealized town he had carried in his mind for years, he found a ghost town. The novel, *Pedro Páramo*, is the result of a desire to bring this town back to life.

**Death** In the novel *Pedro Páramo* the presence of death predominates. This preoccupation with death as a theme is also characteristic of most of Rulfo's short stories. In the town, the dead talk about killings and death, and in their graves, they continue their conversations

about death. Rulfo's preoccupation with death and violence was perhaps due to the many encounters he himself had with death—the revolution, the Cristero revolt of the late 1920s, and the violent deaths of some of his relatives. Both his father and his uncle were assassinated, and his grandfather was strung up by his thumbs and lost them.

### Works in Critical Context

Although critics frequently categorize him as a regional writer, many commentators have acknowledged that his work transcends strictly regional concerns, embodying universal themes as well as metaphysical, social, and political questions. His literary reputation is based only on the stories in *The Burning Plain, and Other Stories* and the novel *Pedro Páramo*. Both garnered critical and popular praise, first in Mexico, then abroad.

***Pedro Páramo*** Critics are in agreement that with the publication of *Pedro Páramo* the Mexican novel reached a high degree of perfection. In his essay "Landscape and the Novel in Mexico," Octavio Paz writes, "Juan Rulfo is the only Mexican novelist to have provided us an image—rather than a mere description—of our physical surroundings. Like [D. H.] Lawrence and [Malcolm] Lowry, what he has given us is not photographic documentation or an impressionist painting; he has incarnated his intuitions and his personal obsessions in stone, in dust, in desert sand. His vision of this world is really a vision of another world." In *The New Spanish-American Novel*, Carlos Fuentes writes, "The work of Juan Rulfo is not only the highest expression which the Mexican novel has attained until now: through *Pedro Páramo* we can find the thread that leads us to the new Latin-American novel."

### Responses to Literature

1. In a group, discuss which ghosts in *Pedro Páramo* are most helpful and which are not. Why might this be?
2. Research San Gabriel, Mexico, the place that Rulfo most often wrote about. What do you think attracted him to the area? Write a paper that offers your findings and conclusions on the matter.
3. Does *The Golden Cock* seem like a film or a story? What's the difference? Write an essay that answers these questions.
4. In an essay, compare *Pedro Páramo* to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. What do the towns have in common?

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## Rumi

BORN: 1207, Balkh

DIED: 1273, Konya

NATIONALITY: Persian

GENRE: Poetry, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Mathnawi* (1260–1273)

*Diwan-i Shamz-i Tabriz* (1244–1273)

#### Overview

Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalal ed-Din Rumi (1207–1273) was a brilliant lyrical poet who founded his own religious order, the Mevlevi. His poetry showed original religious and wonderfully esoteric forms of expression, and his greatest work, the *Mathnawi*, has been compared to the Koran.

#### Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Young Traveler** Born in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan), Jalal ed-Din Rumi left with his father at a young age, fleeing the Mongol invader of his day, Genghis Khan. On this trip in the city of Nishapur, the young Rumi was presented to the famous old poet Attar, who, according to legend, predicted his future greatness and gave him his *Book of Secrets*. Then, Rumi and his father traveled through Baghdad, Mecca, Damascus, and Erzincan, finally reaching present-day Turkey around 1217. They settled in Konya, where Rumi resided for most of his remaining life. His father was appointed to a high post

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rumi's famous contemporaries include:

**Temüzin** (1162–1227): Better known by his official title—Genghis Khan—Temüzin united many of the nomadic tribes of northeast Asia to found the Mongol Empire. His descendants would go on to conquer much of Eurasia, making the Mongol Empire the largest geographically contiguous empire in history.

**Thomas Aquinas** (1225–1274): An Italian Catholic priest, Aquinas is best known today for his contributions to moral philosophy and theology. Many regard him as the Catholic Church's greatest theologian and philosopher.

**Sheikh Saadi** (1184–1283): An important Persian poet of the Middle Ages, Saadi is admired for both his poetry and his proto-sociological observations. A quote from one of his poems, emphasizing the oneness of all human beings, adorns the entrance of the United Nations Hall of Nations in New York City.

**Roger Bacon** (1214–1294): Also known as Doctor Mirabilis (wonderful teacher), the English philosopher and natural scientist Bacon was one of Europe's early advocates of empiricism and of what would become the scientific method.

**Louis IX** (1214–1270): The only canonized king of France, Louis IX was a great patron of the religious arts and a fervent crusader, though both his crusades (in Egypt and the Middle East) were near-complete disasters.

in the empire of the Seljuks of Rum (now in Turkey). With his father's death in 1231, Rumi inherited his post, becoming a man of means. As such, he could devote his efforts to more esoteric fields: poetry and mystic theology or philosophy. He pursued his muse in these fields until his death in 1273.

**Religious Inspiration** The event that had the greatest influence on Rumi's intellectual and moral life was his meeting with the Sufi mystic Shams al-Din Tabrizi. Shams was a believer in spirituality and inspired Rumi with a religious fervor. As a result of this friendship, Rumi dedicated most of his writings to this wandering Sufi. Another result was Rumi's founding of the Mevlevi order of dervishes—the dancing dervishes—to celebrate the mysteries of Divine Love. The unique trait of this order was that, contrary to general Muslim practice, Rumi gave a considerable place to music (the drum and reed) in the ceremonies. Rumi's followers, however, were intensely jealous of Shams, and their abuse and threats of violence forced him to flee Rumi's presence on more than one occasion. When Shams disappeared in 1248—murdered by Rumi's disciples, according to some reports—the

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The inadequacy of language to communicate the deepest sorts of ecstasy or joy or pain or fear has often resulted in poetry that works on a more or less religious level, even when it is not explicitly religious poetry. Here are some examples of nonreligious poetry that become mystical in this way:

*Leaves of Grass* (1855), a collection by Walt Whitman. American poet Whitman's monumental lifework, this collection suggests a fundamentally different way of understanding and organizing human experience, an expansion of logic to allow for the perspective embodied in his famous lines: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

*The Tao Te Ching* (c. fourth century BCE), by Lao Tzu. Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu's classic work of poetic philosophy, offers an understanding of the world around us as both unimaginably complex and also, somehow, intimately accessible and tangible.

*Hymn to Aphrodite* (c. sixth century BCE), a poem by Sappho. Regarded in antiquity as one of the greatest of lyric poets, Sappho's poetry (of which only fragments today remain) prompted the Roman writer Horace to write that her lyrics are worthy of "sacred admiration."

distraught Rumi began writing both poetry and philosophy at a frenetic pace.

Rumi's first work during this time is expressed as the voice of Shams. But, soon, Rumi found his own voice as evidenced in his work *Mathnawi*. This work is a collection of poetic narratives—poems, tales, anecdotes, and reflections—that illustrate the Sufi doctrine. His subject matter ranges from the saints of Islam to mystical interpretations of life, as well as commentaries on the Koran, all done in his clear and ecstatic prose verse.

**A Poet of the First Order** Rumi was a poet of the first rank. His style was simple and colloquial. His tales possessed diverse qualities: variety and originality, dignity and beauty, learning and charm, depth of feeling and thought. Taken as a whole text, though, the *Mathnawi* is rather disjointed; the stories follow one another in no apparent order. But it is filled with lyrical inspiration. Each small tale may be read separately, and one cannot help but be impressed by their succinctness.

Rumi died on December 17, 1273, in Konya. He was so well known in his lifetime that representatives of all major religions attended his funeral. He was not the first great Sufi poet, but his reputation for a wholehearted embrace of spiritual passion set him apart.

## Works in Literary Context

Rumi's thousands of writings treated subjects ranging from love and sexuality to sadness and loneliness, from eternal beauty to human friendship. His *Mathnawi* is a staggering collection of over twenty-five thousand different pieces, which Rumi worked on for forty years. The anecdotes and stories in *Mathnawi* come from a variety of modes of Islamic wisdom—ranging from the Koran itself to common folktales—and are intended to illustrate and inspire others to emulate the Sufi way of life. On the other hand, Rumi's first collection of verses, *Diwan*, contains mystical poems focusing on ecstatic religious love and spiritual intoxication, among other things.

### **One Part Poet, Two Parts Spiritual Leader**

Regarded by many as having provided the second-most important spiritual text of Islam, second only to the Koran, Rumi embarked on the path of Sufi mysticism at a relatively mature age. Chief in driving his development in this arena was first his relationship with the Sufi mystic Shams, and then Shams's somewhat mysterious disappearance. The general idea underlying Rumi's poetry is that God is absolute, ecstatic love. With his skillful evocations of this idea in its human contexts, he gained many devotees—and even disciples—during his lifetime. He may truly be understood as having been a spiritual leader, and the religious ardor with which his texts have been criticized and espoused by both contemporaries and followers attests to his importance in the cultural formation of a Persian-language, Sufi spirituality.

## Works in Critical Context

Rumi's critical reception has varied widely over the centuries, and is most consistent perhaps only in its endurance. In particular, Western readers have often found themselves confused or puzzled by what seem like unsystematic narrative structures in the *Mathnawi*, complaining that the stories themselves do not cohere. At the same time, however, Rumi has long been acknowledged as a genius in the non-Western world, with many commentators considering his *Mathnawi* as second only to the Koran in both religious and literary significance.

Although some contemporary detractors found fault with his reliance on anecdotes and what they saw as a lack of metaphysics in his work, he was revered by many during his lifetime. Even presently, the Western world has come to acknowledge the historical and human importance of his work, with scholarship on Rumi proliferating from the late nineteenth century onwards. Indeed, Charles Haviland wrote in 2007 for the BBC News that Rumi had become the "most popular poet in America."

## Divine Love for Sale

R. A. Nicholson, one of Rumi's early translators into English (1926), observed some time ago that Rumi was "the greatest mystical poet of any age," asking, "Where

else shall we find such a panorama of universal existence unrolling itself through Time into Eternity?" More recently (1994), John Renard has argued that "Rumi the teacher uses the prophets and their stories as a convenient reservoir of familiar and attractive images with which he catches the ear of his listener, and as the come-on with which he entices the prospective buyer into his shop. Leaving himself open to the charge of bait-and-switch merchandizing, what Rumi is really selling is a vision of the relationship of the divine to the human and of a way homeward."

## Responses to Literature

1. One of the central preoccupations of Rumi's poetry is love, both divine and human. Analyze the messages Rumi is offering about love in one to three of his poems. To what extent is Rumi's work relevant to modern life?
2. Preview Rumi's *Masnavi* and consider the structure of the verses. Why do you think many readers have found it difficult or confusing. Structure your response as an essay.
3. Examine some of Rumi's writings on Sufi mysticism. Discuss the meditations Rumi offers on the meaning of life and God. Explain why you think his message is still popular with modern Western readers.
4. Rumi was a spiritual leader, a philosopher, and a poet. Compare and contrast his philosophy with that of a Western writer, such as Walt Whitman or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Structure your response as a thesis-driven essay.

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## Salman Rushdie

BORN: 1947, Bombay (now Mumbai), India

NATIONALITY: English

GENRE: Fiction, nonfiction

MAJOR WORKS:

*Midnight's Children* (1981)

*Shame* (1983)

*The Satanic Verses* (1988)

*East, West* (1992)

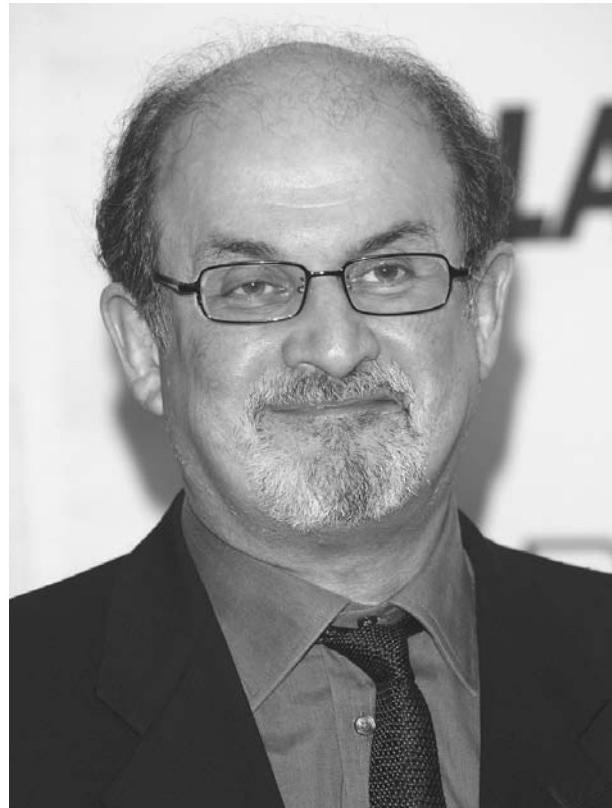
*The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995)

## Overview

Salman Rushdie began his writing career quietly, but he quickly became one of the twentieth century's most well-known writers, not only for the ire he attracted from Islamic fundamentalists after the publication of his 1988 work, *The Satanic Verses*, but also for his thought-provoking examinations of a changing sociopolitical world landscape in works like *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*.

## Works in Biographical and Historical Context

**Growing Up with India** Ahmed Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947, into a middle-class Muslim family



Salman Rushdie Evan Agostini / Getty Images

in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. His birth occurred just two months before India achieved its independence from England, a coincidence that later inspired his novel *Midnight's Children*. He is the only son of Cambridge University-educated lawyer and businessman Anis Ahmed Rushdie and teacher Negin Butt Rushdie. After attending the Cathedral Boys' High School, at fourteen he continued his education in England at the Rugby School. Speaking of his time there, Rushdie told *New Yorker* contributor Ian Hamilton he "had a pretty hideous time from my own age group: minor persecutions and racist attacks which felt major at the time...." Rushdie's family joined him in England in 1962, though two years later they would move to Karachi, Pakistan to start a family business. In 1965 Rushdie enrolled at King's College, Cambridge. After earning a master's degree with honors in 1968, he pursued acting at the Fringe Theatre in London. In 1969 and into the 1970s, Rushdie worked as an advertising copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather and for Ayer Barker, but by 1975 was well into work as a full-time novelist.

**Confident First Novel** Rushdie's first novel, *Grimus*, initially attracted attention among science fiction readers. In a *Times Literary Supplement* review, Mel Tilden called the book "engrossing and often wonderful" and dubbed it "science of the word..., one of those novels some people will say is too good to be science fiction, even though it contains other universes, dimensional doorways, alien creatures and more than one madman." Though critics variously described the work as fable, fantasy, political satire, or magic realism, most agreed with *Times Literary Supplement*'s David Wilson, who determined it "an ambitious, strikingly confident first novel."

In 1976 Rushdie became an executive member of the Camden Committee for Community Relations, which assisted emigrants from Bangladesh, and served until 1983. The experience of dealing with others' cultural displacement, along with other incidents about this time, sensitized him to the problem of racism in Britain, where he "saw the fractured identity of exiles, emigrants, and expatriates, their sense of loss..." and whereby he also "became sensitive to his own designation as 'Indian,' which simultaneously place[d] him inside and outside of British culture."

It is the Indian culture that informed his second book, *Midnight's Children*, an allegory which chronicles the history of modern India through the lives of 1,001 children born within the country's first hour of independence from Great Britain on August 15, 1947. Among these 1,001 is the novel's protagonist, Saleem Sinai, who tells his story in the context, wrote *New York Times* critic Robert Towers, of the country's "stupendous Indian past, with its pantheon, its epics, and its wealth of folklore... while at the same time playing a role in the tumultuous Indian present."

**Winner of the Booker Prize** *Midnight's Children*—which was then favorably compared to several important works, from Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to V. S. Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization* and has since made such lists as The Modern Library's 100 Best Novels at number ninety—was almost unanimously well received and won England's most exalted literary award, the Booker McConnell Prize for fiction, in 1981.

Rushdie's third book, *Shame*, also blends history, myth, politics, and fantasy in a novel that is both serious and comic but extends further with its exploration of such issues as the uses and abuses of power and the relationship between shame and violence. The idea for the novel, reported scholar Ronald Hayman, grew out of Rushdie's interest in the Pakistani concept of *sharam*—conveying a hybrid of sentiments, including embarrassment, modesty, and the sense of having an ordained place in the world. In developing this concept, Rushdie told Hayman, he began "seeing shame in places where I hadn't originally seen it."

**Human Nature and Politics** In discussing *Shame*, Rushdie also explained how he would "be thinking about Pakistani politics and... find there were elements there that [he] could use," having as he did a "feeling of stumbling on something quite central to the codes by which we live." These central themes would inform his next works, a nonfiction account of the political and social conditions Rushdie observed during his 1986 trip to Nicaragua, and his fourth novel, one which would make his name known even to nonreaders.

**Exceptionally Controversial Fourth Novel** *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's fourth novel, outraged Muslims around the world. They pronounced it an insult to their religion. It caused demonstrations and riots in India, Pakistan, and South Africa, during which a number of people were killed or injured. The book was banned in several countries, and bookstores the world over were firebombed. Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini charged Rushdie with blasphemy, and proclaimed that the author and his publisher should be executed. Multimillion-dollar bounties were offered to anyone who could carry out this *fatwa*, or decree, and several people involved with the book's publication were subsequently attacked, seriously injured, and even killed, as was Rushdie's Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi, who was stabbed to death at the university where he taught in Tsukuba, Ibaraki.

Rushdie's wife of thirteen months, author Marianne Wiggins, went into hiding with him when the death threat was announced. She soon emerged and indicated that their marriage was over. The first *fatwa* was delivered via radio on February 14, 1989. Although Rushdie began making public appearances again in 1996, every February 14 since, says Rushdie, he receives a "sort of Valentine's card" from Iran, reminding him they have not forgotten.

In 1990 Rushdie released the fantasy novel *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a bedtime story written for his son Zafar but one that also is said to have an important underlying message for adults. Critics interpreted the message as being not only a prescient call for global environmentalism but a suggestion that artistic freedom not be stifled. Richard Eder, in his *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, suggested, “Rushdie defies the Ayatollah’s curse. It is he, not his persecutor, who is the true defender of the Third World.”

**Transitions to Shorter Fiction** In 1995, six years after the *fatwa*, Rushdie published the collection *East, West*. Nine short stories sectioned into three different locations—India, Europe, and England. Its central theme is what the author described to *Newsweek* interviewer Sarah Crichton as “cultural movement and mongrelization and hybridity,” a reflection of Rushdie’s own background, a “heritage . . . derived from the polyglot tumult of multi-ethnic, post-colonial India,” wrote *Washington Post Book World*’s Shashi Tharoor. Each story in *East, West* contains characters embodying diverse cultures who interact on a variety of social and emotional planes, all of which, wrote John Bemrose in *Maclean’s*, “beneath their infectiously playful surfaces, ponder the imponderables of human fate.”

Likewise, in another 1995 work, Rushdie was not only back on the best-seller lists but again blending caricature, satire, and politics. *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is an undisguised parody of the politics and powerful fundamentalist leaders of India. Almost a mirror to *Satanic Verses*, the book was immediately pulled from Indian bookstores and subjected to an embargo by the Indian government.

While many like Paul Gray of *Time* asserted that *The Moor’s Last Sigh* “is much too teeming and turbulent, too crammed with history and dreams, to fit into any imaginable category, except that of the magically comic and sad,” Rushdie told Maya Jaggi in *New Statesman* that the novel was a “completion of what I began in *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*—the story of myself, where I came from, a story of origins and memory. But it’s also a public project that forms an arc, my response to an age in history that began in 1947 [when India became democratic socialist]. That cycle of novels is now complete.”

**A Switch to Mainstream Fiction** After publishing *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which many found too complicated and too layered, Rushdie tried for more mainstream fiction. *Fury* appears initially to be more straightforward than many of his previous novels, but millennial paranoia, the Internet, American consumerism, and civil war in a small third world country are all themes that find their way into the work. Some critics commended Rushdie’s scathing view of American society; others concentrated on singularly successful elements of the work. Still others showed dismay, calling it instantly “obsolete.”

## LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIES

Rushdie’s famous contemporaries include:

**William Henry (Bill) Gates III** (1955–): American entrepreneur and founding head architect and chief executive officer of Microsoft, named the richest man in the world by *Forbes* between 1995 and 2007.

**Florence Griffith-Joyner** (1959–1998): American track-and-field Olympic medalist who set world records in the 1980s.

**Tony Kushner** (1956–): American playwright most famous for his play *Angels in America*, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

**Azar Nafisi** (1955–): Iranian academic and writer best known for her best-selling book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*.

**Jerry Seinfeld** (1954–): Award-winning American comedian, actor, and comic writer whose show, *Seinfeld*, was named by *TV Guide* “the greatest American television program of all time.”

In late 2005 Rushdie recovered with *Shalimar the Clown*, the story of a former U.S. ambassador to India who is murdered by his Muslim driver. Mixing elements from the *Ramayana*, a classic work of Indian literature, Rushdie creates what one critic for *Kirkus Reviews* called “a magical-realist masterpiece.” Rushdie also published a number of essay collections. Some, such as “One Thousand Days in a Balloon” and “Why I Have Embraced Islam” were written after he was forced into hiding; others, showing a writer gradually forming his own concepts of truth and beauty in literature, date from before the *fatwa*. These works, *Commonweal* reviewer Paul Elie elaborated, “serve as a reminder that once upon a time”—before the wrath of fundamentalist Islam fell upon on the author’s head—“he was just another middling British writer, holding forth on this and that with more intelligence and enthusiasm than was required of him.”

## Works in Literary Context

**The Symbolism of Common Items** Rushdie’s opus has contributed to the literary, cultural, and political world in many ways. Rushdie has primarily made a career out of poking fun at religious fanatics of every stripe. One technique of Rushdie’s to further this aim was to infuse common objects with enormous symbolic significance. In *Midnight’s Children*, for instance, pickled chutney is one of the main images for India’s cultural and social maelstrom; in *The Satanic Verses*, bad breath plays a vital role in telling good from evil. Few other writers dare to found

## COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Here are a few works by writers who also succeeded in publishing some of the most socially or politically controversial works of all time:

*The Anarchist Cookbook* (1971), a nonfiction work by William Powell. Written as a Vietnam War protest, this book contains "recipes" for bombs, drugs, and other contraband.

*The Jewish Peril: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903), an opinion work by an unknown author. In this work, conspiracy theories are presented that urge anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and world dominance by way of media and other control.

*Lolita* (1955), a novel by Vladimir Nabokov. The tragic-comic Humbert Humbert in love with a preadolescent girl made critics violently oppose the "pornographic" implications and the book—as one of the "filthiest ever"—was often banned from publication.

entire symbolic structures on items as replaceable as a sheet with a hole in the middle, but to Rushdie it undoubtedly seems a worse exercise in illogic to kill people over the contents of a so-called "holy" book. Rushdie is known to take influence from a range of creative minds including Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, and Gabriel García Márquez.

### Works in Critical Context

***The Controversial Satanic Verses* (1988)** Rushdie's habit of using the outrages of history made *The Satanic Verses* (1988) a book of frightening precognition. In the novel, a complex narrative that tells several stories within a story in a manner that has been compared to *One Thousand and One Nights*, Rushdie has a writer sentenced to death by a religious leader. The writer in the book is a scribe meant to chronicle the life of a prophet who—as the writer of the book enjoys riddling—both "is and is not" Mohammed. Creating this character, who exists within a psychotic dream of one of the two men who fell from the airplane, was a natural extension of Rushdie's personal horror at fundamentalist Islamic rule. It is this dream sequence that ignited fatal riots in India and prompted Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence.

Religious objections to the novel stem from sections of the book that concern a religion resembling Islam and whose prophet is named Mahound—a derisive name for Mohammed. Many Muslims claim that Rushdie repeatedly makes irreverent use of sacred names throughout the book. For his part, Rushdie has argued that *The Satanic Verses* is

not meant to be an attack on the Islamic religion, but that it has been interpreted as such by what he called in the *Observer* "the contemporary Thought Police" of Islam who have erected taboos in which one "may not discuss Muhammed as if he were human, with human virtues and weaknesses. One may not discuss the growth of Islam as a historical phenomenon, as an ideology born out of its time." *New Republic*'s Michael Wood noted, however, that "the pervading intelligence of the novel is so acute, the distress it explores so thoroughly understood, that the dullness doesn't settle, can't keep away the urgent questions and images that beset it. This is Rushdie's most bewildered book, but it is also his most thoughtful."

### Responses to Literature

1. Read *The Satanic Verses*. Think about who the narrator is. What does he say that helps identify him? How does he treat the people he speaks about in the book?
2. Also, as you read, consider what makes this book so provocative that someone or some group would want to censor it and hurt (or even kill) its author. Make note of anything you see as possibly objectionable (to yourself or others).
3. In *The Satanic Verses*, what clues reveal that Satan is the narrator? What do you think Rushdie is hinting at by having the devil tell a story of "holy" content? How do you think the book offends? Why, for example, do you think Muslim people would protest the work?
4. After you have made notes and discussed the narrative point of view and provocative content, take a partner from class. Each of you choose a side and set up a debate: One of you take the side of Salman Rushdie. One of you take the side of Ayatollah Khomeini. Before the debate, make a list of at least four reasons to support your side of the argument. Once you have your lists, exchange them. As you read your opponent's list, choose one reason that you understand to some degree, and write that down on a side sheet of paper. You do not have to agree with that one supportive point. Just write it down.
5. Return your original lists to each other. Develop a short argument in your favor (as either Rushdie or Khomeini). Create a brief introduction that states your case, then bring in the reasons you listed. You may want to embellish with facts, metaphors (comparisons), authoritative quotes, or other important details to support your side. Add your opponent's reason to the end of your argument. Precede it with a signal word or phrase—granted, true, understandably—to show your audience you are respecting your opponent's way of thinking. This is called a concession. You do not give in or agree completely, but you acknowledge the opposition. Then, you return to your concluding points in your favor: "I still say...."

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